

Why So Much Stress?

Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma

Yes! It is that time of year again when Standard 5 primary school students and their parents are winding up to the famous Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) examinations. Over the last few months, my son began complaining about sleeplessness, frequent headaches and neck aches, and only very recently he showed me an unusual rash that has developed on his fingers. A child who is normally a healthy and consistent eater is now saying that he does not feel hungry and often insists on going to bed without dinner; however, he seems to find great satisfaction in a bar of chocolate at any time of the day! Does this sound familiar? If it does, then your child may be suffering from a case of examination stress and it can range anywhere from critical or very serious to mild.

While some parents and many teachers believe that this condition is a natural part of taking examinations and have successfully transferred this myth to their children, this can be very detrimental not only to the mental health of the child but also to the physical, psychological, and emotional health. Against this background, perhaps the most important questions that the adult stakeholders should ask themselves are: Why is it that our children are subjected to such an ordeal at such a young age? Why do we pressure our children so much and is it really worth the cost [to the children] to get into one of the prestigious schools in the country and then, on the rebound from SEA pressures, to perform at levels below their potential?

Educational research on examination stress suggests that, in fact, many children are able to somehow cope with the stress prior to major examinations, but soon after they go into a state of mental relaxation that persists for long periods. So much so, that they are unable to effectively apply themselves to the academic challenges that inevitably come shortly after the examination. In the local context, for example, at Standard 5 level, for several months before SEA children are often mechanically drilled in mathematical and literary skills in preparation for the examination. The argument in support of this procedure is that only these skills are examined, and for many teachers and parents this is a sound enough argument.

In what is perhaps a myopic view of the education system, teachers and parents often conveniently forget that these children will, in only four short months after the SEA, be faced with 8, 9, 10, or even 11 different subjects when they enter secondary school. While they would have perhaps mastered mathematical and literary skills, and may be able to transfer understandings in these areas to subjects that are similar in nature, often they are totally lost in classes that require basic scientific literacy skills and skills of social studies, geography, and history.

I believe that the pressure is simply too much. The stress levels are much too high for children of such tender age, most of whom are still in a delicate phase of emotional development. Some claim that the competition among schools in general and among peers within the same class is healthy. While that may be true to a

certain extent, SEA has been able to stretch this claim beyond its elastic limit, so much so that it can quite possibly cause irreversible damage to the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of our children. Their fear/worry about achieving below the expectations of families, friends, and teachers is so great that in many cases it often seems as if our children are being judged and tested not only on subject matter, but rather as people!

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine