

When 12-year-olds’ reflection in class revolves around PSLE

By Michelle Lee

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 2, Section: | OPINION

Tuesday 18 August 2026

1362 words, 1023cm² in size

386,100 circulation

When 12-year-olds’ reflection in class revolves around PSLE

Their anxiety is a wake-up call for parents to ensure our affection for our children does not rise and fall with their exam marks.

Michelle Lee

My daughter is in Primary 6 this year and, along with a whole cohort of 12-year-olds, is facing the fork in the road that the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) represents.

Her teachers recently had the class write short reflections in response to prompts like “How have you been feeling lately?” and “How would you like your parents to support you?”

Their anonymised reflections were later shared with parents. Reading them broke my heart because they revealed just how much their lives revolve around the PSLE and how heavily its pressures weigh on them.

Their words were a mix of pleas to parents: to ease up on expectations, to be more encouraging, and to not compare them with a sibling or classmate. Almost all of them had seemed to internalise, completely, that the PSLE is a high-stakes academic milestone.

Societal unease about this preoccupation with the PSLE is evident in the recurring calls, within and outside Parliament, to remove the exam altogether or at the very least reduce its role as the sole determinant of a child’s next educational chapter.

Over the years, the Ministry of Education has introduced several policy shifts to ease the pressure on students. For example, in 2018, it extended the Direct School Admission scheme, an alternative pathway into secondary schools

that recognises non-academic talents, to all secondary schools. Since 2021, the PSLE has been graded not by the old T-score, which pitted children against one another on a bell curve, but by wider Achievement Level bands.

Despite these efforts, the PSLE race has continued largely unabated. Anxious parents still see top scores as the surest way into elite secondary schools that they view, rightly or wrongly, as providing a better education.

It bears pointing out, too, that how well a child does is often not just about the child; our own ego and self-esteem as parents are boosted vicariously by our child’s achievements, and a good PSLE score is a coveted prize.

And so, parents adopt a variety of approaches aimed at getting their child to study hard: expressing approval or disapproval, dangling rewards, and playing the comparison game against better-performing peers. These tactics are born of an abundance of love, tangled up with anxiety about their child’s future.

But they can have unintended effects on a child’s psyche and may not serve the child’s best interests.

WHEN APPROVAL BECOMES CONDITIONAL

Researchers in a study published in 2003 in the Journal of Personality found that when parents’ warmth visibly rises and falls with a child’s achievements, children do not simply try harder. Tracking three generations of



Anxious parents still see top scores as the surest way into elite secondary schools that they view, rightly or wrongly, as providing a better education, says the writer. PHOTO: ST FILE

the same families, they found that children raised this way often act out of a sense that they “should”, rather than because they genuinely want to – a pattern that came bundled with greater resentment towards their parents and poorer overall well-being. Troublingly, these children tended, in turn, to raise their own children the same way.

A related line of research on what psychologists call “contingent self-worth” found something similar: Students who base their sense of self-worth on academic performance experience sharper emotional highs after success, but also sharper lows after failure, along with greater vulnerability to anxiety and depression. Their self-esteem becomes hostage to the next test.

We can, for a start, decouple our approval from our children’s results, not by pretending we don’t care how they do, but by making sure that our affection for them does not rise and fall with their marks.

One study found that children whose parents supported their autonomy, rather than making love contingent on performance, did just as well academically,

without the emotional cost.

WHEN REWARDS BACKFIRE

To spur achievement, parents often reach for incentives: money, a new phone, the promise of a Nintendo game if certain grades are achieved. These rewards tap into extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation – the internal pull that keeps us at something for its own sake.

In learning, intrinsic motivation derives from the quiet satisfaction of finally grasping a concept, or the small thrill of an insight arrived at independently. But research on motivation has long shown that extrinsic rewards can crowd out intrinsic drive.

A child bribed with gifts for good grades gradually comes to study for the reward, not for the learning. Take the gift away, and the studying tends to stop with it.

Worse yet, studies suggest that monetary incentives foster a transactional mindset, one that has children instinctively asking, “What’s in it for me?” Effort becomes something to be weighed against monetary payoff, not undertaken for its own sake.

And there lies the problem:

Learning does not always yield immediate, visible rewards. Its benefits – the nourishing of a mind, the scaffolding for how we come to understand the world – are reaped over the long term, and a transactional mindset is poorly equipped to notice them.

Motivation research suggests that directing children’s attention to the positive emotion that comes with achieving small learning goals, such as the satisfaction of figuring out a maths problem, and coupling that with praise can help nurture intrinsic motivation.

A nurturing environment that gives children a degree of autonomy in choosing their own challenges cultivates it further.

THE COMPARISON TRAP

Parents sometimes explicitly compare a child’s performance to a stronger-performing classmate, or hold up someone they consider a role model, believing the upward comparison will spur their child to work harder and aim higher.

Research does bear this out to an extent: Social comparison with better-performing peers can indeed motivate and improve performance. But the approach is

a double-edged sword. In being told they fall short, a child may take that as a fact that defines them, rather than as a spur to try harder.

Absorbed this way, it can shape how much they believe they are capable of long after the comparison itself is forgotten, making them less willing, later on, to aim high or take on stretch goals.

Where comparison feels unavoidable, it does far less damage measured against a child’s own past performance than against a sibling or classmate held up as the standard to meet.

LET THEM LEARN TO FIND THEIR WAY

At a societal level, it is time to accept that much of our anxiety over academic performance is rooted in an outdated belief: one that casts the academically excellent student, who later becomes a productive economic unit, as the ultimate ideal.

As artificial intelligence reshapes what counts as valuable work, the ability to merely accumulate knowledge and operate within well-defined boundaries matters less than it once did.

What is likely to matter more is the ability to adapt: to keep learning, unlearning, and relearning as the ground shifts beneath us. We would be short-changing our children by scripting their every move towards a top PSLE score, rather than letting them learn to find their own way.

We should also cultivate genuine acceptance of alternative definitions of success, building pathways for diverse talents. This involves treating the PSLE as one data point in a much longer, less predictable race than the one we have been training our children to run.

As for my daughter’s classroom and the student reflections, perhaps the exercise served its intent, which may have been to jolt parents into seeing the vulnerability of their children and to re-focus attention on their emotional well-being.

It certainly reminded me to have a deeper conversation with my daughter, one that casts the PSLE as an opportunity to cultivate the habit of diligence and self-directedness. More importantly, it reminded me to assure her that her worth is never summed up in any score.

Michelle Lee is associate professor of marketing at Singapore Management University’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business and is also associate provost (undergraduate education). She teaches a course on sustainable consumption.