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The release of the Uganda National Examinations Board results is always a defining national moment. Celebration, disappointment, relief and heartbreak sit side by side across the country. Yet beyond individual scores lies a deeper, more uncomfortable question that we must ask: Is the pressure we place on children to excel proportionate to the outcomes?

For many learners, the journey to national exams is marked by fear, anxiety and exhaustion. When results fall short of expectations despite relentless pressure, it is time to interrogate not the child, but the system.

Many private primary schools charge fees that are higher than those paid in universities and other tertiary institutions. On top of fees, parents are required to meet endless demands — mock exams, remedial classes, holiday packages, special uniforms, meals, transport and examination-related charges.

Parents invest heavily, believing that higher fees guarantee superior outcomes. Yet when results are released, the performance does not always match the financial sacrifice. For many families, this becomes an economic loss.

This disconnect should force schools to do an honest reflection. If the pressure, time and money invested

are not yielding proportionate results, then something fundamental in the teaching and learning approach needs to change. Education should not become a high-risk financial gamble for families.

WHEN HARD WORK TURNS INTO HARMFUL PRESSURE

In many schools, learning in the Primary Six-Seven and Senior Three-Six classes becomes a marathon of early mornings, late nights, endless tests, holiday boot camps and constant reminders that failure is not an option.

Children are taught to fear exams rather than understand them. There is no more time for co-curricular activities for candidate classes.

Such environments often suffocate the very capacities children need to perform well: confidence, creativity, focus and emotional stability. A fearful child may memorise content temporarily, but struggle to retrieve it under tension and examination conditions. When results do not match the pressure invested, the next action should be reflection, not escalation.

Stop labelling children as weak or less academic: A few things damage a child more deeply than being told that they are academically weak. Labels such as “slow learners,” “non-candidates,” or “you can’t manage A-class or first grade” shape a child’s self-image long before the examination room.

Once a child lowers expectations, their performance declines. Teachers must recognise the power of words.

WHEN EXAMINATION PRESSURE BACKFIRES

As UNEB results spark mixed emotions nationwide, they expose a deeper concern: excessive pressure, high costs and fear-driven learning that often fail to deliver proportionate outcomes for children.

The exam journey has become emotionally draining and it is time to question not the child, but the system shaping these outcomes.

Encouragement builds effort; humiliation kills it. Every learner deserves to be taught with dignity.

CREATING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Schools must begin by redefining what effective preparation looks like. Quality learning is not measured by the number of hours a child sits in class or the volume of tests administered, but by how well a learner understands concepts and applies them independently.

Schools can do better by prioritising learner-centred teaching approaches that encourage understanding rather than cramming.

Continuous assessment should be diagnostic and supportive, not punitive. Feedback should guide improvement, not induce fear. Creating safe spaces where learners

can ask questions, make mistakes and learn at their own pace is essential for long-term academic success. Children also need balance.

Play, rest, music, sports and peer interaction are not distractions from learning; they are essential components of healthy cognitive development.

ADDRESSING EXAM ANXIETY

Exam anxiety is one of the silent barriers to performance in our schools. Yet it is often misunderstood and punished rather than addressed. Children who ‘freeze’ during classes in exams are sometimes labelled lazy or unserious, when in reality they are overwhelmed.

Schools need to integrate psychosocial support into their academic programmes. Guidance and counselling should not be cosmetic departments activated only during crises.

Teachers must be trained to recognise signs of stress, burnout, fatigue and anxiety and to respond with empathy and support. Teaching basic coping skills — time management, relaxation techniques, and positive self-talk can improve performance without increasing academic pressure.

REDUCING DESPERATION

One of the tragic consequences of excessive pressure in schools is the rise in examination malpractice. When schools measure their worth solely by grades and league tables, desperation replaces integrity. Teachers panic,

administrators cut corners and children are dragged into unethical practices they do not fully understand.

WHAT PARENTS MUST CHANGE

Parents are often silent enforcers of school pressure. Heavy financial investment can translate into heavy academic and emotional expectations. Yet children are not investment projects; they are developing human beings.

Parents must resist the temptation to compare schools, grades and children. Encouragement, emotional safety, adequate rest and realistic expectations often contribute more to success than pressure ever will. Parents should also ask schools hard, but respectful questions: How do you support learner well-being? How do you handle struggling children? How do you prepare without inducing stress and fear? How do you promote rest/relaxation of your students or co-curricular activities?

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORTS

The education ministry must take leadership in resetting the culture around examinations.

Regulation of excessive instructional hours, monitoring of learner welfare, and clear guidelines against harmful practices are essential.

Teacher training should emphasise child psychology, assessment ethics and professional communication. National messaging should affirm that learning is a process and that success has multiple pathways beyond one examination.