

# An Investigation of the Nature of the School - Based Assessment (SBA) Programme Implemented in Junior Secondary (Gr. 6-9) Classes in Sri Lanka

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## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

Education aims to develop a well-rounded character, consisting of knowledge, attitude, and skills (UNESCO, 2017). Assessment is crucial for assessing students' competency in knowledge, attitudes, and abilities, and identifying the necessary feedback and follow-up. School-Based Assessment (SBA) in Sri Lanka is a shift from traditional summative assessments to formative, continuous evaluations, focusing on students' overall skills and competencies (UNESCO, 2017). This aligns with the global trend towards competency-based education, which emphasizes developing critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and practical application of knowledge in real-world contexts (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Sri Lanka's education system heavily relies on standardized exams for performance evaluation, often neglecting higher-order cognitive skills crucial for intellectual and personal growth (Silva, 2022). The Sri Lankan Ministry of Education has implemented reforms to incorporate SBA into the junior secondary curriculum to enhance student learning comprehension. SBA is based on formative assessment principles, emphasizing continuous evaluation and feedback as crucial parts of teaching and learning. These assessments provide students and teachers with valuable insights, enabling timely interventions (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Sri Lanka's SBA aims to foster a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and practical skills development through creative and collaborative tasks like projects, presentations, group activities, and portfolios (Perera & Wijesundara, 2023). This method not only enhances students' analytical skills but also prepares them to tackle complex problems in their academic and future professional lives (OECD, 2019).

The shift towards formative assessments aims to promote education inclusivity and equity by addressing diverse learning styles and needs, thereby reducing educational disparities. However, teachers face challenges in aligning SBA tasks with curriculum goals due to lack of training, resources, and support (Bandara, 2020). Inconsistencies in SBA guidelines interpretation and application across schools have resulted in discrepancies in assessment practices, compromising the reliability and validity of the evaluation process (Wijetunge, 2021). Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring SBA fulfills its promise of enhancing student learning and fostering a more holistic educational experience.

Sri Lanka's commitment to educational reform is evident in its policies aimed at modernizing the curriculum and integrating 21st-century skills into teaching-learning processes (Ministry of Education, 2021). SBA is a key component of this reform agenda, aligning with global emphasis on lifelong learning (Wiliam, 2011).

SBA in Sri Lanka represents a fundamental transformation in student learning evaluation, focusing on formative, continuous assessment methods that prioritize skills and competencies over factual recall. The goal is to cultivate a generation of learners who are better equipped to think critically, solve problems, and apply knowledge meaningfully. However, this paradigm shift requires sustained support, training, and resources to overcome challenges and ensure a more engaging and effective educational experience for all students.

### **Problem Statement of the Study**

School-Based Assessment (SBA) is a crucial component of the educational curriculum in Sri Lanka, aiming to promote continuous,

formative assessments that foster deeper learning, critical thinking, and practical application of knowledge among students. However, the alignment between SBA tasks and curriculum goals is often challenging, leading to significant discrepancies in student performance across different schools and regions (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2021).

Educators face challenges in designing SBA tasks that adequately reflect the curriculum's learning outcomes and competencies, as many teachers feel ill-prepared to create assessments that evaluate higher-order skills like critical thinking and problem-solving (Silva, 2022). The lack of professional development opportunities and resources further exacerbates this problem, resulting in assessments that focus more on rote learning rather than holistic development of students' skills (Bandara, 2020).

Inconsistencies in the interpretation and application of SBA guidelines across schools also contribute to the misalignment between SBA activities and curriculum objectives. Teachers in different schools implement SBA practices in varied ways, leading to a lack of standardization in student evaluations (Perera & Wijesundara, 2023). The heavy workload associated with the continuous assessment process places a significant strain on teachers, particularly in schools with large class sizes, where individualized feedback and tailored assessment approaches become practically unfeasible (Wijetunge, 2021).

Resource disparities between urban and rural schools also play a critical role in the uneven implementation of SBA. Schools in rural areas often lack the necessary infrastructure, materials, and technological support to conduct diverse and engaging assessment activities, limiting students' exposure to a range of learning opportunities (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2021). This inequity not only hampers the quality of education in less-privileged areas but also contributes to widening the gap in student performance between different regions.

Cultural resistance from both educators and parents, who often perceive traditional summative assessments as the most credible form of student evaluation, undermines efforts to shift towards a more holistic and

formative assessment approach. The absence of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework further limits the effectiveness of SBA in achieving its objectives (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Addressing these issues is crucial to realizing the full potential of SBA as a tool for fostering meaningful student learning and creating a more equitable educational landscape in Sri Lanka.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study on School-Based Assessment (SBA) in Sri Lanka is significant as it provides insights into its effectiveness in junior secondary education. SBA represents a shift from traditional summative assessments to more formative, continuous evaluations that focus on students' overall skills, competencies, and practical knowledge application (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2021). Understanding the dynamics of SBA is crucial for fostering deeper learning, critical thinking, and holistic development of students in Grades 6 to 9. The study informs policymakers and educational stakeholders about the current state of SBA implementation, identifying areas where it aligns with its intended goals and where it falls short. It also highlights the challenges faced by educators in aligning SBA tasks with curriculum objectives, providing a foundation for targeted professional development and training programmes to enhance teachers' assessment capabilities (Perera & Wijesundara, 2023).

The findings will play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy and practice by addressing disparities in resources and infrastructure that affect SBA implementation across different schools and regions. By shedding light on these inequities, the research can guide resource allocation and support strategies that ensure all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to high-quality educational experiences (Wijetunge, 2021). This approach promotes educational equity, leveling the playing field for students from under-resourced schools and enabling them to engage more fully in the learning process.

The study's exploration of the challenges related to the entrenched examination culture in Sri Lanka's educational system will be instrumental in shifting mindsets towards a more formative approach to student evaluation. Understanding the barriers that prevent the full adoption of SBA can lead to strategies that promote a culture of learning and growth over rote memorization and exam-centric instruction (Wiliam, 2011).

This study's findings could significantly influence educational policy decisions in Sri Lanka, providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing SBA implementation and guiding reforms to make the education system more dynamic, student-centered, and adaptable to societal needs. The findings will guide educational reforms and policy decisions, aiming to create a more inclusive, equitable, and skill-oriented educational system that empowers junior secondary students to thrive academically and personally.

## **Objectives of the Study**

### **Main Objective**

The study aims to investigate the implementation of School Based Assessment (SBA) in junior secondary (Gr. 6 - 9) classes in Sri Lanka, with specific objectives also included.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To identify the state of School Based Assessment in the school system
2. To inquire teachers about the status in the School Based Assessment in the school system
3. To investigate issues arising from its implementation at the school level.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The theoretical review for the investigation of the nature of the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme implemented in junior secondary (Grades 6-9) classes in Sri Lanka focuses on understanding the conceptual foundations and theoretical underpinnings of SBA.

School-Based Assessment (SBA) is a formative assessment approach that emphasizes continuous evaluation of students to inform and enhance teaching and learning practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It is designed to provide timely feedback to both teachers and students, allowing them to adjust instructional strategies and learning approaches as needed to support individual student progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The shift from traditional summative assessments to SBA represents a significant transformation in educational practices, as it encourages students to engage in tasks that involve inquiry, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge in real-life contexts (Shepard, 2000; Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001).

Constructivist theory, particularly the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, plays a crucial role in underpinning the concept of SBA. Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that learners construct knowledge through active engagement with their environment and experiences, while Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes the importance of scaffolding learning experiences to help students achieve their potential with guidance and support from teachers (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). SBA provides opportunities for guided learning, enabling students to progress beyond their current abilities through continuous assessment and feedback.

The successful implementation of SBA in the Sri Lankan school system requires a deep understanding of these theories to ensure that assessment practices are effectively aligned with educational goals and teaching methodologies. Teachers play a critical role in implementing SBA, and their perceptions are shaped by their understanding of formative assessment theories and their ability to translate these theories into practice. The theory of reflective practice, proposed by Schön (1983), involves the continuous self-evaluation and adaptation of teaching strategies based on classroom assessments.

Teacher self-efficacy, proposed by Bandura, provides a theoretical lens to understand teachers' perceptions of SBA, emphasizing the need for adequate professional development and support systems to empower

teachers in adopting SBA practices (Bandura, 1997). Several theoretical frameworks help explain the challenges associated with the implementation of SBA at the school level, including Kotter's eight-step process for leading change, the diffusion of innovations theory by Rogers (2003), and institutional theory. In Sri Lanka, the long-standing emphasis on high-stakes examinations has created a culture that prioritizes summative assessments over formative ones, which poses a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of SBA.

The empirical review for the investigation of the nature of the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme implemented in junior secondary (Grades 6-9) classes in Sri Lanka focusses on examining studies that address the following objectives and research gap. Research on the implementation and effectiveness of Student-Based Assessment (SBA) in Sri Lanka has shown mixed results. Urban schools tend to implement SBA more consistently than rural schools, primarily due to differences in resource availability, teacher training, and administrative support. A study by Silva (2022) highlights the lack of standardization in SBA implementation across schools, leading to inconsistencies in the way assessments are conducted and reported. This variability makes it difficult to compare student performance reliably across different educational institutions.

Wijetunge (2021) indicates that while SBA was introduced with the intention of moving away from traditional, exam-focused assessments, many schools still rely heavily on summative assessment methods, which undermines the goals of SBA. Teachers' perceptions play a crucial role in the success of SBA, as they are the primary agents responsible for its implementation in the classroom. Perera (2022) found that teachers in Sri Lanka often struggle with the dual demands of completing the curriculum and conducting SBA. The time-consuming nature of continuous assessments leaves them with little time to cover the prescribed syllabus, creating tension between the goals of SBA and the expectations of summative exams.

Silva and Ratnayake (2023) explored teachers' attitudes towards SBA and found that while they see its potential benefits for enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, they also express concerns about its practical challenges. Teachers highlighted issues such as insufficient training, lack of resources, and inadequate support from school management as significant barriers to the successful adoption of SBA practices.

The implementation of SBA in Sri Lankan schools has faced several practical challenges, including the disparity in resources between urban and rural schools. Research by Jayasinghe and Fernando (2022) highlights that rural schools often lack the basic infrastructure needed to conduct SBA activities effectively, leading to unequal learning opportunities for students in different regions.

Another critical issue is the resistance to change among both educators and students. Silva (2022) noted that the traditional emphasis on high-stakes examinations in Sri Lanka creates a mindset that prioritizes test scores over the learning process, leading to a preference for more familiar, exam-oriented learning approaches.

Gunawardena and Perera (2023) identified inconsistencies in the assessment standards applied across different schools as a major challenge in the implementation of SBA. Their study revealed that without a standardized approach to evaluating SBA tasks, there are significant variations in how student performance is assessed, which affects the reliability and credibility of SBA as a tool for measuring student achievement and progress.

## **Research Methodology**

The selection of research methodology is guided by the research objectives, necessitating careful consideration of whether the research is exploratory or confirmatory in nature. Therefore, this research adopts a pragmatic approach, focusing on practical situations and real-world issues. The pragmatism philosophy suggests that knowledge is gained through practical inquiry, and my research also seeks to investigate the

nature of the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme implemented in junior secondary (Gr. 6-9) classes in Sri Lanka, focusing on identifying pragmatic remedies for real-world issues. As this study investigates the real situation of new concepts, it follows a deductive approach.

Accordingly, in order to get answers to the research questions in this research, information will be collected simultaneously but separately from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this study, the survey research methodology for the quantitative method was employed to collect specific information from respondents and analyze it to investigate the nature of the SBA programme implemented in junior secondary (Gr. 6-9) classes in Sri Lanka. A sample of 710 teachers was selected using simple random sampling. The study utilised both qualitative and quantitative data to gather data from structured questionnaires. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis from curriculum developers, subject directors, teachers, and documents. The choice of data collection method depends on the research objectives, practicality, and resource limitations.

In this study, data was collected through questionnaires from teachers in 6-11 of three provinces. The field study was conducted in three phases: interviews with 05 curriculum developers and 10 zonal directors, questionnaires prepared for 710 randomly selected teachers, field visits to 10 selected schools, and focus group discussions with teachers. Conducted interviews with curriculum developers and zonal education directors to investigate the nature of the SBA programme implemented in junior secondary (Gr. 6-9) classes in Sri Lanka. Documentary analysis was done using documents issued by various ministries and institutes. The total number of sample units for data collection was 725.

This study used both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, with research questions as a guide. Quantitative data was analyzed using basic statistical methods. Thematic-based qualitative analysis was used to analyze responses from interviews, questionnaires, and documents. Teachers' data was collected through questionnaires and

focus group discussions, while curriculum developers' and directors' data was collected through interviews. Demographic data was analyzed considering school type, educational zone, nature, and area (rural/urban).

## Findings

The study covered teachers from all provinces, with the exception of the Northern Province. Information was collected from 710 teachers, comprising 100 from Central Province, 30 from Eastern Province, 13 from North Central Province, 91 from Sabaragamuwa Province, 162 from Southern Province, 84 from Uva Province, 84 from North Western Province, and 146 from Western Province.

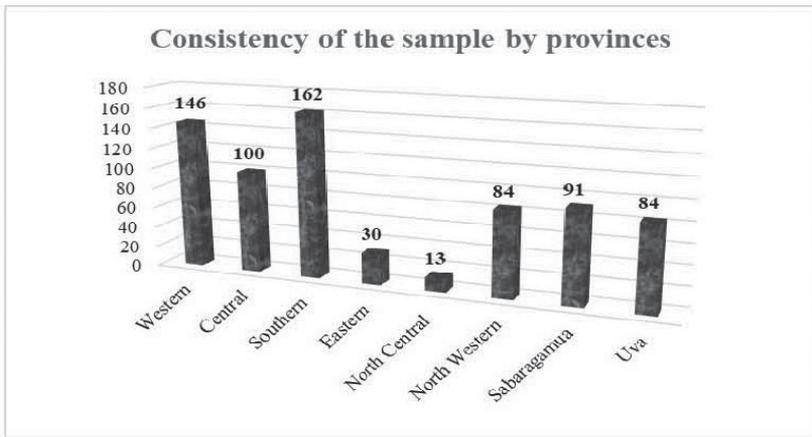
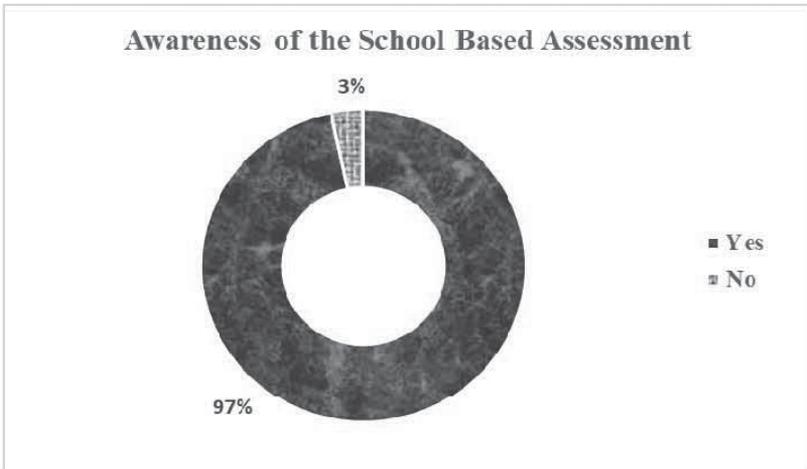


Figure 1: Consistency of the sample by provinces

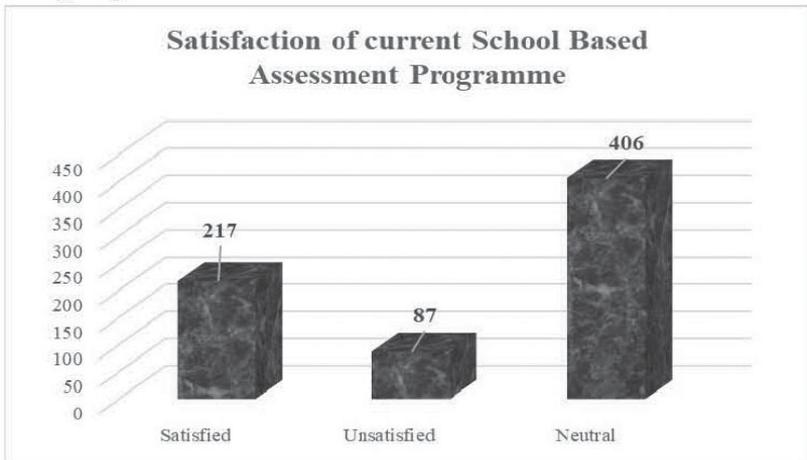
SBA is a comprehensive assessment method that transitions from traditional exams to continuous evaluations, promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, with implementation varying across schools based on teacher readiness and institutional support. The data shows that only 97% of teachers are aware of school-based assessment (SBA), with 3% completely unaware. This disparity is based on provinces, with central and north central provinces having the highest awareness, followed by western and southern provinces, southern and Uva provinces, North Western provinces, and eastern provinces.



**Figure 2: Awareness of the School Based Assessment**

The data shows that 37.5% of respondents believe the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme enhances their understanding of subjects compared to traditional methods. However, 35.1% are neutral, and 8.9% have a negative view, with a larger portion of 35.1% and 8.9% having neutral opinions. And the survey results indicate that 30.6% of respondents are satisfied with the current School-Based Assessment programme, while 12.3% are unsatisfied. The majority, 57.2%, are neutral, meaning they are neither fully satisfied nor dissatisfied. Some aspects may need improvement, but a small percentage of respondents are not entirely discontent. A significant number of individuals are satisfied, indicating that some programme elements are meeting expectations.

The SBA programme is a valuable tool for teachers, with 55.1% stating its effectiveness in evaluating student skills, creativity, and criteria. Active student engagement aligns with constructivist principles. SBA contributes positively to student development, with 4.6% mentioning it as beneficial for overall growth. It also aids in exam preparation, with 4.4% finding it helpful. 8.5% of respondents acknowledge its utility in self-evaluation and lifelong learning, enhancing subject knowledge and teaching



**Figure 3: Satisfaction of current School Based Assessment Programme**

practices. However, 10.3% of respondents expressed a need for further training or clearer communication about the programme's objectives and methods.

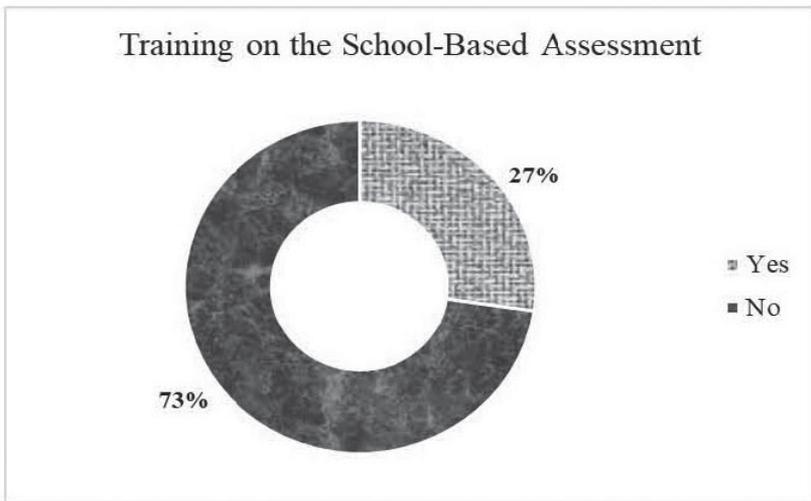
The study explores the balance between Self-Assessment (SBA) and traditional exams in evaluating students' understanding of subjects. SBA emphasizes continuous evaluation through projects, assignments, and practical tasks, allowing students to demonstrate skills, creativity, and critical thinking. Traditional exams measure memory recall, analytical skills, and organization under pressure. Combining SBA and traditional exams provides a holistic approach, emphasizing knowledge application, problem-solving abilities, and soft skills like communication and teamwork, ensuring students develop real-world skills for future education.

SBA reduces stress for students by distributing assessments over time and recognizing continuous efforts. It caters to diverse learning styles and allows each student to showcase their abilities in the most suitable format. A balanced approach between SBA and traditional exams ensures fair and accurate evaluations, reducing biases and also results have been communicated to students (76.7%), but not to parents (31.7%). Less than 50% of teachers have engaged in feedback processes.

The study found that Student Assessment (SBA) is more effective in aligning teachers' learning needs. It allows teachers to design assessment tasks that align with lesson objectives and students' specific needs, provides continuous feedback, helps identify challenging units, and adjusts teaching strategies. This real-time insight helps teachers address learning gaps and improve teaching effectiveness. SBA also encourages active student participation through practical assessments and explores innovative ways to assess learning beyond traditional exams.

The effectiveness of the SBA programme within the educational system is assessed by examining the current implementation status and identifying gaps in teacher training.

The data indicates that 72.7% of teachers (516) believe they lack adequate training on the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme, while only 27.3% have received such training.

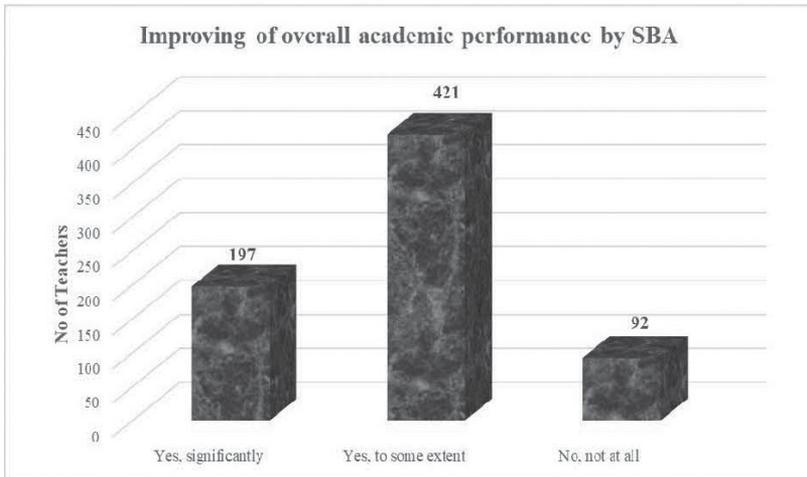


**Figure 4: Training on the School-Based Assessment**

The majority (77.3%) believe they need further training to effectively implement the SBA programme, while 22.7% feel they don't need it.

The School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme has been rated by teachers as highly effective or quite effective, with 28% finding it very

effective and 31.5% deeming it quite effective. However, a small percentage found it less useful, with 4.5% and 2.4% rating it as inefficient. The majority of teachers perceive the SBA programme as beneficial for their academic performance, with 27.7% believing it has significantly improved their performance and 59.3% feeling it has helped to some extent. However, 13% do not believe the programme has made any improvement



**Figure 5: Improving of overall academic performance by SBA**

The SBA programme faces several challenges for participants in completing assessments. The most prominent issue is the difficulty in obtaining necessary resources, which is a critical gap in support. Clear instructions are another issue, with 37.2% respondents (264) reporting issues due to unclear instructions.

Time constraints are another challenge, with 33.5% respondents (238) citing insufficient time to complete assessments, which can negatively affect the quality of student evaluations. Additionally, 13.1% respondents (93) noted confusion about assessment criteria, which can lead to inconsistencies in assessment conduct and evaluation. A heavy workload is another challenge, potentially impacting their capacity to manage assessments effectively.

This study of 710 participants found that 59.3% of them did not feel the School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme added unnecessary stress or pressure. However, 22.1% felt the programme contributed to stress or pressure. Additionally, 18.6% were unsure about whether the SBA programme added unnecessary stress. The majority of respondents did not perceive the SBA programme as a source of stress, but a significant percentage experienced stress related to the programme. The uncertainty among 18.6% suggests varying perceptions and experiences regarding the programme's impact on stress levels.

The study highlights concerns that the SBA programme may increase stress and pressure on teachers and students. Teachers face additional responsibilities in preparing, conducting, and grading SBAs, often lacking adequate training and resources. SBA can be challenging when adapting tasks to students' varying abilities, increasing stress in ensuring fairness and accuracy. With a crowded curriculum and limited teaching hours, managing time effectively for syllabus and assessment coverage can create pressure. School administrations may emphasize SBA results as indicators of teacher effectiveness, adding pressure on teachers to ensure student performance.

The study reveals that while some schools have integrated summative assessments (SBA), many still rely on traditional methods due to a lack of standardized approaches. Resistance from educators and administrators is often driven by exam-based evaluations, suggesting a need for a cultural shift towards a more formative, student-centered approach. The study also highlights challenges in implementing SBA due to resource limitations, particularly in urban and rural schools. Lack of essential materials, technology, and infrastructure, as well as clear guidelines and standardized training programmes, can hinder educators from designing tasks that align with curriculum standards

## **Conclusion**

The Sri Lankan Assessment and School Based Assessment programme is a comprehensive approach to student assessment that aims to promote active student participation and creativity. However, many teachers

remain unconvinced about its superiority over traditional assessment methods. While practical work and group activities are widely used, methods involving higher cognitive skills are less frequently used. A balanced approach is needed to evaluate student performance using various assessment methods.

Alternative professional development is needed to ensure teachers fully understand and can effectively implement SBA in their classrooms. The SBA programme encourages active student participation through practical assessments and encourages teachers to explore innovative ways to assess student learning beyond traditional exams. By combining school-based assessment and traditional examinations, the education system can ensure students are prepared with the necessary skills for real-world challenges.

The SBA programme aligns better with students' learning needs by focusing on formative assessment practices that foster continuous growth, practical skills, and adaptability. However, proper assessment cannot be done based on factors such as classroom size, teacher periods, and the competitive examination system.

The SBA programme is effective but faces challenges due to inadequate teacher training. To improve its implementation, there's a need to address gaps in teacher training and provide ongoing support.

The SBA programme faces challenges such as insufficient resources, unclear instructions, and poor time management, which need to be addressed to improve its effectiveness and reliability.

## **Recommendations**

The School-Based Assessment (SBA) programme in Sri Lanka has been deemed effective, but concerns have been raised by teachers. To improve the programme's effectiveness, the Sri Lankan education system should develop comprehensive professional development programmes, emphasize the use of various assessment methods, promote balanced approaches, facilitate collaborative learning, address systemic constraints, and create a supportive environment (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Popham, 2013; Fullan, 2014).

Training should include practical workshops, peer mentoring, and ongoing support. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt a balanced approach that integrates SBA and traditional examination methods, focusing on continuous improvement and feedback. Collaborative learning strategies should be promoted, such as project-based assessments and peer evaluations (Brookhart, 2013; Hattie, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Joyce and Showers, 2002).

Systemic constraints, such as classroom size, teaching periods, and competitive examination culture, should be addressed (Blatchford et al., 2011; Shepard, 2000). Policy changes or resource allocation should be advocated for to support smaller class sizes and more manageable teaching loads (Darling-Hammond, 2010). A supportive environment should be created within schools, valuing innovative assessment practices and encouraging experimentation with new methods (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

Regular evaluations of the SBA programme's effectiveness should allow for ongoing improvements and adaptations. Findings from these assessments can be used to refine training programmes, resources, and guidelines for successful implementation (Guskey, 2002; Desimone, 2009).

To foster a positive attitude towards SBA, success stories and case studies should be shared within the school community, and stakeholders should be involved in discussions about the benefits and importance of the programme. Further research on stress factors and strategies to alleviate pressure for those affected by the programme is needed (Bandura, 1997; Epstein, 2011; Fullan, 2014).

Finally this study suggests that while the SBA programme can enhance student learning and assess student abilities, its success relies on teacher training, consistent implementation strategies, and continuous monitoring. It suggests policy adjustments and further research to optimize the effectiveness of SBA programmes.

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