



# Experiencing Childhood in the Context of Societal Academic Expectations

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**Abstract** The present paper discusses in part the findings from the first author's master's dissertation exploring the experience of childhood in the context of increased academic expectations in society, with special reference to Kerala, India. The objectives were to understand how academic expectations on children shape their childhoods and to document children's time use and daily lives. A mixed research design was chosen: in-depth interviews were supplemented by a quantitative study on the time allocations of children for different activities. Triangulation of data was done by interviewing three groups of participants: children ( $n = 10$ ), parents ( $n = 8$ ), and key informants ( $n = 3$ ) selected through convenience and purposive sampling. The qualitative data and time-use data are from separate samples. The latter study was conducted on fifth and sixth graders ( $N = 320$ ) from the Kozhikode district of Kerala. Children's voices indicated an over-emphasis on academic achievement from different quarters: parents, teachers, and peers. This is reflected in their day-to-day conversations, peer cultures, and daily pursuits. Findings from the time-use study supported the qualitative data: routines of children predominantly revolved around academic activities (35% of 24 hours, including time at school), and little time was devoted to physical play

(5.67%). Parents' voices corroborated these findings and gave insights into the children's internalization of societal beliefs regarding academic achievement. Inputs from the key informants helped understand the development of the societal beliefs and practices that perpetuate a preoccupation with educational attainment in the community, and the adverse psycho-social impact it has on the children in this context.

**Keywords** Experience of childhood · Academic pressure/expectations · Kerala education · Children's voices · Daily time usage

## Experiencing Childhood in the Context of Societal Academic Expectations

“A playful childhood is worth more than the accumulation of every conceivable standard, real or imagined” (Christakis, 2016, p. 186).

### The Hurried Child

David Elkind was among the foremost developmental psychologists to argue against intensive academic instruction during early childhood through his pioneering works entitled *The hurried child* (1981) and *Miseducation* (1987). The argument was that adult-imposed early academic experiences run counter to the preschool child's natural disposition to learn through play and exploration. A childhood that is so directed, and almost orchestrated, by parental whims is believed to take away from the child's self-directed learning and experiences. Childhood is conceived as active, ingenious, imaginative, explorative, and

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accentuated by unstructured play. Kagan and Zigler (1986) noted the increasing pressure on young children to become achievers due to academic expectations that are developmentally inappropriate. American researchers in the early 90's observed that advocacy of intensive early childhood education encouraged upper middle class parents who were eager to give their children an early advantage or set them on a "fast track" toward success (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990). These trends prompted the researchers to study how parental beliefs and school practices play out in the child's academic environment and the impact of *academic acceleration* on young children. Hirsh-Pasek et al. define academic acceleration as "parental attitudes and school philosophies that encourage the introduction of academic instruction at young ages" (p. 417, 1990). They found that that there were no lasting academic advantages for those who received early academic training, and perhaps more importantly, that higher parental academic expectation and higher academic orientation of school environment were found to be negatively related to the expression of creative behaviors.

### Cross-Cultural Differences in the Orientation to Academic Achievement

Christakis (2016) remarks how over-scheduling children is fetishized by parents in certain communities, that it has come to be seen as a child-rearing virtue to program children to be able to perform beyond their years in different areas of skill—both academic and non-academic. The culture of achievement orientation in students from South-East Asia and their parents has been widely studied (Chen, 2005; Cheung, & McBride-Chang, 2008). Nearly 60% of the East Asian parents claimed to have begun teaching their children reading, writing, and math prior to kindergarten (Schneider & Lee, 1990). Parental involvement, expectations, achievement goals, and filial piety of students have been implicated in Taiwanese students' achievement outcomes (Chen & Ho, 2012). These studies have prompted cross-cultural research exploring variations in cultural notions of what constitutes success in life, in academic motivation goals, and the importance given to academic attainment (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). Compulsion for credentials has been explored as a possible factor behind the achievement-driven culture in Asian migrants (Waters, 2006). The theory of creation of 'knowledge societies' may shed further light on why parents from developing countries are preoccupied with their children's academic success; these cultures consider educational attainment as the pathway to larger developmental goals (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

### The Indian Educational System

It is pertinent to familiarize with the educational and social ecology that the participants of the present study inhabit, in order to fully appreciate their experiences and how academic expectations surround them. The primary pedagogical approach in the Indian school system is rote learning and memorization. Learning is mostly text-book oriented. Instead of focusing on experiential teaching–learning activities, there is a preoccupation in the classroom to cover the prescribed syllabus before the examinations, and teachers tend to concern themselves more with finishing the portions on time. Examinations typically function as tests of students' memory retention and ability to reproduce information in a time-bound setting, rather than as an assessment of their learning. Students are therefore encouraged to study in an exam-focused manner—referring to previous years' question papers, and preparing ideal answers that will fetch them the best grades. This entails devoting several hours a day after school revisiting and preparing notes about what was taught in school. As exams near, students spend more time revising the bulk of the prescribed lessons. A typical weekday of an Indian school student starts early in the morning and often extends till late evening or night, as a vast majority of them attend tuitions centers (private tutoring beyond regular school) and coaching classes (preparatory classes for college entrance tests) after their school hours. Although academic pressure heightens in the upper grades, the schema for learning, homework, and preparation remains largely similar in the lower grades.

### Mental Health and Well-Being of Indian School Children

Several studies have explored the impact of academic stress on Indian students, particularly among higher secondary students (Agrawal & Chahar, 2007; Kadapatti & Vijayalaxmi, 2012). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that a total of 1323 students below the age of 14 committed suicide in India, in the year 2013. A study published by the NCRB (2010) on the causes of suicide reported that the percentage share of the cause 'Failure in Examination' increased by 23.3% over the years 2009 to 2010. In a study on Indian high school students, 81.6% of the participants reported that they experienced examination-related anxiety (Deb et al., 2015). Sarma (2014) reports a finding that parental pressure indirectly predicted suicidality through academic stress and depression. Studies have documented mental health issues such as school anxiety (Karande et al., 2018) and refusal (Nayak et al.,

2018), depression (Grover et al., 2019), behavioral disorders (Gupta, 2017), and psychosomatic complaints such as tension headaches (Rangaswamy, 1982) in children. Verma et al.'s (2002) finding reflects a no-win trade-off between academic and leisurely pursuits, and mental health in Indian adolescents: those who spent more time doing homework experienced lower average emotional states and more internalizing problems, while those who spent more time in leisure experienced more favorable states but also reported higher academic anxiety and lower scholastic achievement. As academic success is internalized as the main source of self-worth, the cultural and systemic environments influence young students to function a certain way that appears to be non-conducive to their overall well-being.

### The Kerala Context

Kerala has consistently remained the state with the highest literacy rate in India. Researchers attribute this to the state government's investment in the public education system, healthy competition between government-run schools, government-aided private schools, and a booming private education sector, resulting in a dense and prevalent educational infrastructure statewide (Dhanuraj, 1995). Although compared to those of other states, public schools of Kerala are reportedly well maintained and infrastructurally sound, some even boasting technologically adept smart classrooms, enrolment rates over the recent years indicate that more parents are shifting toward private schools (Annual Status of Education Report Centre, 2015). The trend is despite substantial differences in household expenditure incurred between sending children to private versus public schools where tuition, uniforms, and textbooks are free and incur minimal cost (Tilak, 2002). This indicates that parents in Kerala are increasingly seen to prefer sending their children to private schools even if it means spending more (Kumar & George, 2009). This preference is in view of early instruction in the English language, and reportedly, because parents believe private schools provide their children with the opportunity to mingle with children from rich and educated families (Karopady, 2014). Valatheeshwaran and Khan (2017) provide conclusive evidence that international remittances, particularly from Gulf migration, have played a significant role in increasing the enrolment of children to private schools. Over and above regular schooling, 67% of students from Kerala were also found to avail private tuition in all subjects, which was significantly higher than the trends from other states studied (Sujatha, 2014).

### Children's Voices

Parents' motivations toward economic stability and upward social mobility may unknowingly transfer their anxieties onto children, and this may be reflected in their hurrying of children (Elkind, 1982). Inadvertently, children may be restricted from pursuing activities that a child may naturally or developmentally be oriented toward, and their pursuits may largely be influenced by parental agenda (Christakis, 2016). Researchers have engaged in scholarly debates as to whether an academic orientation in early childhood pressurizes or stimulates children (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990), and whether the concept of *the hurried child* is a myth or if it does detrimentally impact the experience of childhood (Lynott & Logue, 1993; Meyrowitz, 1984). It becomes pertinent here to explore the matter through the voices of children themselves (Douglas, 2010); what do children think and feel about their daily lives, and whether they feel they have a say in how they spend their time. Researchers need to adopt methods that can optimize the participation of young people in studies that involve or affect them, and in the development and implementation of policies that concern them (Carnevale, 2020). The concept of *children's voices* assumes identity, agency, and empowerment (Maybin, 2013) and maybe defined as "views of children that are actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children's lives" (Brooks & Murray, 2016). Certain methodological concerns have been raised regarding the use of children's voices in research such as issues of authenticity, representativeness, the need to address the diversity of childhoods and multiplicity of voices, and about children's participation in research (James, 2007). The present study adopts a method aimed at capturing children's voices about their childhood experiences in the context of societal academic expectations, supplementing it with their accounts of their daily activities and time use, and triangulating this data with narratives of adults.

### Time Use of Children

Several studies were reviewed in connection with the specific objective of documenting the day-to-day time allocation patterns of children. A principal work reviewed is Vleioras's (2010) research on the time use of 164 third and fourth graders in Hellene, Greece. The children were asked to describe sequentially what they did, where, and with whom, during the 24 hours preceding the beginning of the time-diary interview. The main findings were that the students spent 57.0% (8 h 27 min), 21.7%, and 5.0% of their waking time on school-related activities (attending

school, learning languages, doing homework), leisure activities (such as playing and watching TV), and other activities, respectively. The time children from Hellene spent on homework alone (2 h 13 min) was found to be significantly higher than their counterparts in Chicago (55 min) and Beijing (1 h 28 min). The conclusion was that the overall time spent on school-related activities is higher than the time spent on other activities and that the time schedule of Hellene students is directed toward knowledge acquisition, rather than cognitive or socio-emotional development (Vleioras, 2010).

The time investment of 280 Austrian children (sixth to tenth graders) in studying at home and doing homework was studied by Wagner et al. (2008). A diary entry method was used, and the results showed that the children spend 12.1 h on average per week on school-related activities. The specific time usage was found to be 5.7 h for exam preparation, 3.7 h for doing homework, 1.6 h for revising classroom material, and 1 h doing projects. Larson et al. (2001) studied the time budgets of 253 African American fifth to eighth graders, and the findings revealed that a large amount of time (50.7%) was spent with the family and at home, reflecting a collectivistic culture. Studies have also explored the relationship between time-use patterns of children and certain demographic features of the family like the educational status of parents, maternal employment, family size, etc. Bianchi and Robinson (1997) found that children of highly educated parents study and read more and watch TV less, and they concluded that in the USA, parental education is the predominant predictor of the human and social capital investments that children receive.

Several other studies have also shown that a major portion of children's daily time is spent on academic pursuits. According to Larson and Verma's (1999) time-use research across different parts of the world, children of post-industrial countries typically spend roughly 20% of their waking time on schoolwork. US children spend 50% of waking time on leisure and approximately 3 h playing, whereas East Asian children play considerably less. The average amount of rest is 9 h daily (Mauldin & Meeks, 1990; Timmer et al., 1985). Several researchers have remarked that the modern child is overscheduled (Anderson & Doherty, 2005; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001). The review of time-use research did not yield studies documenting daily time allocations of Indian children in middle school. However, a study on Indian middle-class adolescents found that they spend one-third of their waking time in school-related activities (Verma et al., 2002). Another study reports that Indian high school students spend three to four hours daily on homework (Verma & Gupta, 1990).

Vleioras (2010) states that the time spent on one activity means that the time is not available for other activities, and

what children do reflects the priorities set for their development. Hence, understanding the time-use patterns gives us insights as to what activities children pursue, what their parents and teachers want them to prioritize, and largely what society thinks is important for them to do. Differences in the time-use patterns of children across cultures might point to the underlying cultural notions about what is important for children's development. The present study attempts to understand societal academic imperatives on children in Kozhikode, Kerala, through their time-use patterns and their voices about the childhoods they live.

## Method

### Research Design

A mixed method approach of triangulation was adopted for the study wherein qualitative and quantitative methods were used in tandem, to overcome the shortcomings of either and to gather complementary data (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative interviews with children were conducted, along with a time-use study to get an objective outlook of daily time allocations for different activities. Another section of qualitative interviews was done with parents and key informants, and these data were triangulated with that from the children's interviews. The use of triangulation in both the method of data collection and the data sources was to allow for maximum corroboration of findings in a research problem that centers around children's experiences that are co-constructed by them and other players in the society.

The data were collected and analyzed by the first author. The choice of topic and the decision to collect data from a particular geographical/cultural context were both influenced by the author's personal experiences of schooling in the same space, and encounters of societal expectation to excel as a student. While these experiences have enhanced the researcher's ability to capture the cultural nuances and engage better with the participants, it has also required careful reflection and bracketing of subjective influences (Tufford & Newman, 2010) while undertaking the study. In an attempt to ensure objectivity, the first author has maintained critical and reflexive notes throughout the analytic process and engaged in discussions with colleagues apart from supervisory meetings. Toward ensuring the credibility of the analytic output, the findings were discussed with two of the participants—one parent and one key informant.

### Participants

The sample for both the qualitative and quantitative studies consisted of fifth and sixth graders from the Kozhikode

district of Kerala. For the time-use study, 320 students (126 boys and 194 girls, aged 9–12) were sampled using quota sampling based on the type of school: those that follow different syllabi—Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE), and State Board syllabus. The selection of the schools within the pre-determined categories was based on convenience and access. Sampling for the qualitative interviews was purposive. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 children (five boys and five girls, aged 9–11). The interviewed children were not derived from the sample for the time-use study and were recruited separately through convenience sampling. In the next category of qualitative interviews, eight parents of school-going children (five mothers and three fathers) were interviewed. These parents were not necessarily parents of children who were interviewed; only two such paired interviews were done. Thirdly, interviews were also conducted with three key informants—an educator and two psychologists.

## Data Collection

### *Qualitative Interviews*

The interviews were conducted with an aim of getting a comprehensive picture of their everyday lives. The following is a non-exhaustive list of prompts from the interview guide: experiences at school, teachers and friends at school, things that they like or dislike about school, daily routine, studies, and homework, ambitions in life, experiences with family, things that they do together as a family, peer relationships, relationship with family members, play, leisure time activities, vacation days, favorite times of the day, best memories in life. The total time of interviews ranged from half an hour to 1.5 h.

The qualitative data were in the form of audio-recorded interviews. The interviews were a mix of English and Malayalam—the vernacular language of the state. While transcribing, rather than a word-to-word translation the researcher sought to produce near-equivalent expressions in English that best capture the original meaning of what had been said in Malayalam. Atlas.ti software was employed for coding, and thematic analysis was conducted. Line-by-line coding was done on each interview, arriving at a set of codes. Subsequent interviews were coded with the existing codes, and new ones were added. The major themes and the most frequently occurring ones were culled out. The same process was repeated with the three categories of interviews, and the themes were finally collated for discussion.

### *Quantitative Study*

For the time-use study, the participant recruitment was done at the school level after seeking permission from school authorities. The students were administered a self-report time-use sheet in their classrooms after a detailed briefing in both English and Malayalam. The sheet was divided into hourly periods of time and covered a 24-h cycle; from 5:00 am on a typical weekday to 5:00 am on the next day. Three columns were provided; to write the primary activities, any secondary activities the child might have engaged in simultaneously, and with whom the child spent the time. The second and third columns were provided to give more qualifying details for how the time was spent and for clarity in coding. The researcher engaged with the students on a one-on-one basis to check their ability to comprehend the instructions and fill the sheet. In cases where students were unable to record by themselves, the researcher assisted them by running through the sheet verbally and recording the student's responses. (Fig. 1)

## Results

### Themes from the Interviews with Children

#### *Much Work and Little Play*

The children's accounts of their day-to-day lives reflect a lack of time spent in unstructured activities. The recess at school was the one time of the day that almost all the children said they look forward to; a time when they can actually engage with their peers and have no fixed tasks to be done. "We hang out during the lunch break, crack jokes and have fun. After lunch, there is little time to play." The physical education period is another time at school they looked forward to. Several children shared with dismay that their teachers often use up this period to make up for other classes. "Other teachers will come in our PHE (Physical and Health Education) period to complete the portions. They won't listen to us." In prioritizing academic subjects, the teacher here devalues the students' need for play.

Children reported that they engage in a variety of games like collecting free game cards from magazines, chess, patty cake, rock, paper and scissors, and games that they have created on their own. They make use of intervals between periods at school, and even whilst classes are ongoing, to engage in these games with their peers. The school bus, and the ride back home, is much awaited since this is another time where they engage freely and without the disciplinary supervision of teachers.



**Fig. 1** Sample of the time-use sheet

Typical week day	Doing what? (primary activity)	Any other activity side by side? (secondary activity)	With whom?
5:00 - 6:00 am	sleeping		Mother
6:00 - 7:00 am	Brush, bath, dressing		
7:00 - 8:00 am	break fast	watching TV	sister
8:00 - 9:00 am	Packing up to school		sister
9:00 - 10:00 am	Praying form assembly		friends
10:00 - 11:00 am	listening to car in the class room		friends
11:00 am - 12:00 pm	Talking	playing	friends
12:00 - 1:00 pm			

Once at home, playtime is restricted by parents “*Now I get daily half an hour to go on the computer. This half an hour only can I watch something or play a game.*” A lack of engagement in physically rigorous activities is evident. Play after school or at home is often restricted to games on computers, mobile phones, and tablets. “*I don’t really go out to play. Most of the time I play on the computer.*” Virtual gaming seems to have largely replaced outdoor play and exploration particularly for children in the city or suburbs. Children from rural neighborhoods tend to have more opportunities for outdoor play with peers. “*...football from the village ground, then there is space in the fields and we play shuttle from there. Then we play volleyball from the yard next to my house.*”

Children are soon ushered back indoors for their homework and study time. “*I get only very little time to play,*” one of the girls replied when asked how long she generally plays after school. *Free time* was often understood as a time when they are not required or scheduled to do a prescribed task. This can be seen from how one child responded when asked what he does during his free time: “*If I have to write something (schoolwork) I do that.*” Parents and teachers were reported to encourage spending time in play and physical activity, but only after studies are taken care of, implying that academics and knowledge-oriented activities are seen as superior pursuits.

In contrast with days during a school term, vacation days present more opportunities to engage in various non-academic pursuits. Several children recounted the wonderful times they had during vacation staying at relatives’

houses, playing with cousins, putting up make-shift shops in their neighborhood, etc. “*Few days after my exam we went on a tour... Everybody from my dad’s family went! We went to Alappuzha, and on a houseboat. That was a lot of fun.*” However, children expressed their angst at how studies now encroach on their holidays as well, in the form of summer learning camps, preparatory classes, and holiday assignments. “*The bridge course is like a small version of the next year’s syllabus. And I didn’t like that at all. The camp was scheduled for so many days (of the vacation).*”

#### Academic Competition among Peers and Mark-Talk

When asked about his friends, one of the children replied “*And friends... in my group of friends, there are many who don’t study so well. Only some study well. Most of them are into playing more.*” Academic performance or marks (grades) obtained by classmates seem to be the primary yardstick of reference among peers. “*Then among my friends, there is X who studies alright. Then there is Y... like alright range. Then there is Z... we both calculate who comes first. We count the mark... Then we see who gets first. We will only see, we don’t really need a mark sheet!*” Regarding what happens in their classroom and what conversations they have with their friends, the children spoke a lot about marks different students receive on tests, what transpired when someone scored a certain mark, what the teacher did and said in that situation, etc. One of the girls shared “*once in class, one of the girls started teasing me when the results of a competition came, and it came*

*that I got the 17th rank... and she started teasing me... that time I felt really sad.*" There appears to be a classroom culture of discourse around the academic performance of the students, wherein teachers as well as the students partake in and perpetuate an unhealthy obsession around marks.

#### *Academic Preoccupation Colors Choice of Extracurricular Pursuits*

Children's hobbies and their choice of games reflected a prioritization of activities that had some intellectual or cognitive element to them. When asked about their favorite leisure time pursuits, some children talked about reading books and encyclopedias, and engaging in learning-related activities. A similar trend was noted in the choice of extracurricular activities and competitions at school. *"Dad wishes to make me a good speaker. So in the art items, I go for speech."* In another instance, one of the children reported that his mother made him take up chess among the three options given at school: cricket, football, and chess, despite his preference for the other two.

#### *Some Careers are Better than Others*

Children's thoughts about their future pursuits also appear to be shaped by the superior status ascribed to certain knowledge-intensive professions and the expectations of a successful career according to the standards of society. Two boys said they wanted to become either a footballer or a cricketer, but when asked if they thought their parents would be okay with this, they doubted it. One of them said that his parents might say that he *"ought to study and reach a status."* Another boy shared *"Dad told me cricket is only a game. He said that apart from (pursuing) only a game it is better to have another job."*

#### *The Family and Home as an Extension of the School*

The preoccupation with academic pursuit also seems to feature in the children's interaction with their family members. While very few children reported engaging with their parents on a leisurely basis, especially with fathers, most of them engaged with them in the context of studies. Several children reported that their parents supervise their studies, if not sit with them. *"Dad teaches me... all the subjects. When he is home, and not traveling for work, he teaches me, and otherwise, mom teaches."* Children with younger siblings attending school spoke about helping them with their projects and studies. Children with elder siblings appeared to view them as supervisors of their studies, resource persons, and sometimes as disciplinarians and even second parents. *"If I don't do my homework, he*

*shouts at me. When he is home and he doesn't see me studying he will shout,"* one child shared about his elder brother.

The above themes stand apart from the direct pressure experienced by the children to achieve good grades. The children's perception of academic overload seems to depend, to a certain extent, on the child's level of academic competence and their difficulties with learning. Low-achievers shared their distress and seemed to navigate a double pressure—their parents are constantly behind them, worried about their unsatisfactory grades and asking them to study, and on the other hand, the child himself/herself is bothered about their performance and berates the self. Another category of children exists—those who do well but are still very much stressed about maintaining their level of performance. These children tend to pressurize themselves even if the parents might be supportive. In some cases, they present with psychosomatic symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, and vomiting. *"Sometimes I get headaches. Before the exams..."* These children also tend to perceive that what they are required to study is beyond what they can handle. One girl said *"the math textbook is this large (shows thickness with her fingers)"* and remarked that sometimes she feels that she *"can't do this anymore."* When asked about the things in life that make her sad she said: *"if I think I want good marks and I don't get it, then I feel sad."*

#### **A Day in our Lives: Time-use Patterns of Children**

The analysis of the time-use sheets involved coding of the various activities from the children's responses. Eight categories of activities were identified through researcher-imposed coding (Howitt & Cramer, 2011), where the primary aim is to develop categories for quantification, which is then applied to all of the data. The coding schedule developed is as follows:

- (1) Daily maintenance: includes activities of daily living including eating, bathing, brushing, grooming, etc.
- (2) Sleeping: nighttime sleep plus naps.
- (3) School hours: the total number of instructional hours at school (excluding recess).
- (4) Study-related: includes homework, projects, reading of textbooks, attending tuition classes, other religious or co-curricular training.
- (5) Play: rigorous physical play, indoor/outdoor games, and casual play.
- (6) TV/entertainment: watching television, playing games on the mobile/tablet/computer, or engaging with electronic media like web surfing/chatting.
- (7) Chores: running errands and household chores.

(8) Miscellaneous: includes a repertoire of activities that may not be placed into any of the above categories like commuting, waiting, talking, praying, etc.

Following this, the approximate number of hours the students spent on the eight categories of activities was calculated. The quantitative analysis involved only descriptive statistics; calculation of average time spent daily on different activities and then approximating it to time spent per week. Results (see Table 1) indicate that children across different schools on average spent 2 h 42 min in study-related activities, whereas they spent only up to 1 h 36 min in playing per day.

A notable observation is that the time spent on watching television, playing computer games, or on electronic media (almost 2 h) was typically more than time spent on active play; sports and indoor/outdoor games. The children seem to be getting ample time for sleep (average of around 8 h). A large chunk of their time is consumed by the school hours (25% of daily time). In a week, the children spend around 55 h (32.40% of weekly time) on academic pursuits combined; including school hours and study time at home, and around 11% of week time in study at home and homework alone (see Table 2). This is more than half the combined time they spend on all leisure activities including free play and gaming per week (26 h 39 min; 15.71% of weekly time).

Comparing the findings from the present study with other relevant research (See Table 3), the overall impression is that the fifth and sixth graders from the present sample seem to be spending far more time on academic activities than their counterparts, or even older children, from other countries. The comparison of the present results with other studies proved difficult due to three aspects on which the studies differed: differences in the coding of activities, reporting of results in terms of waking hours as

opposed to the total number of hours per 24 h, and difference in age groups. But whatever data were viable for comparison have been culled out and tabulated in Table 3.

Compared to data of students from post-industrialist countries (Chicago, Australian, and Austrian data), the children from Kozhikode seem to be spending a large amount of time on academic activities, excluding school hours. Setting aside sleeping time, children from the present sample were found to spend 14% of their waking time in academic activities. This is less than the average of 20% of waking time (ranging from 2 h 42 min to 3 h 6 min per day) spent on schoolwork by third and fourth graders from several countries (Larson & Verma, 1999). On the other hand, children from Kozhikode spend much lesser time on leisure activities compared to their US counterparts. Children in the US spent anywhere from 210 to 246 min per day on physically rigorous activities and from 108 to 156 min on other entertainment, whereas children from Kozhikode were found to spend around 96 min and 116 min, respectively.

Vleioras (2010) reports that third and fourth graders from Hellene, Greece, spend a total of 8 h 27 min on academic activities: 2 h 13 min outside school hours (an average of 11 min less than the present sample) suggesting that Hellene pupils are more overscheduled than their age-mates in other countries. The time allocations of children from the present sample closely resemble the time-use patterns from the Hellene study. Kozhikode and Hellene pupils seem to spend similar amounts of time on physical play (96 and 75 min per day, respectively) and other entertainment (116 and 82 min, respectively).

**Table 1** Mean time spent on a typical school day by fifth & sixth graders across different schools on the eight categories of activities (N = 320)

School code	Daily maintenance (DM)	Sleeping (S)	School hours (SH)	Study related (SR)	Play (P)	TV/ Entertainment (E)	Chores (C)	Miscellaneous (M)
s1v	2.59	8.16	6	2.15	1.42	1.61	0.7	2.61
s1vi	2.66	7.94	6	2.34	1.33	1.56	0.62	2.86
s2v	2.34	8.56	6	2.04	1.35	1.54	0.81	2.28
s2vi	2.46	7.81	6	2.35	1.34	1.94	0.54	2.31
s3v	2.62	8.22	6	2.28	1.47	1.35	0.83	2.51
s3vi	2.59	7.92	6	2.65	1.47	1.86	1	2.12
s4v	2.89	8.62	6	2.78	1	1.04	0.6	2.41
s4vi	3	7.78	6	2.76	1.48	1.59	0.6	2.35
Mean	2.64 (3 h 4 min)	8.13 (8 h 13 min)	6 h	2.42 (2 h 42 min)	1.36 (1 h 36 min)	1.56 (1 h 56 min)	0.71 (1 h 11 min)	2.43 (2 h 43 min)



**Table 2** Day-wise and week-wise allocation of time to academic and leisurely pursuits by fifth & sixth graders (N = 320)

Activity	Mean time/day	Percentage of time/day (%)	Approximate time/week	Percentage of time/week (%)
Sleep	8 h 13 min	33.87	59 h 41 min	35.36
Study/homework	2 h 42 min	10	18 h 44 min	10.98
School hours	6 h	25	36 h	21.43
Combined time for academic activities	8 h 42 min	35	54 h 44 min	32.40
Play; physical/games	1 h 36 min	5.67	13 h 2 min	7.75
Entertainment/media/computerized games	1 h 56 min	6.50	13 h 37 min	7.95
Combined time for leisure activities	3 h 32 min	13.83	26 h 39 min	15.71

## Perspectives from Parents and Key Informants

### *Parental Involvement in Children's Academics*

The high level of involvement of parents in their children's academic lives was mirrored in the interviews with parents. Parents with higher levels of education tended to sit with their children and teach their lessons. When they deemed themselves inadequate, most of them arranged for extra tutors. In some cases where parents are both highly educated and working, the involvement was very high even if the time on their hands was relatively less. Parents shared that they often did the projects and models which are difficult for a child to execute. Some parents seemed to be well aware of the unhealthy academic competition being slammed onto school-going children and shared their observations of other parents who partake in this regardless of their education. *"My colleagues here who are pursuing Ph. D., they sit and make their children study... beating them, in anger that they have lost a mark... a colleague of mine, she actually gets disappointed and worried if her children's marks dip."*

All three key informants noted the increasing trend of sending very young children for extra private tuitions; either for remedial inputs or to make the already performing child perform better. They reported that parents harbor a notion that just going to school is not enough. *"As a result of going to several different tuition classes for different subjects, the child's day is so jam-packed that it leaves no time or energy for him/her to play or wind down."* In some cases, children are sent to tuitions both in the mornings before school begins and in the evenings after school.

### *On the Competitive Classroom Culture*

Some parents noted that their children experienced a culture of competition among their peers. *"There is a lot of competition in class... grit about marks among the classmates... a mark oriented culture in the class, even if it is*

*not apparent on the surface."* One father opined that the competitions at school were very unhealthy and do not instill the spirit of sportsmanship. A mother noted how her child finds it difficult to accept defeat in academics and even in general play, often going to lengths to win, bending rules in his favor, or stopping playing if he knows it is not going well for him. Another parent opined that it is often parents who get drawn into this competitive culture more than the child: *"During the parent-teacher meetings... some parents come and ask for their child's rank, even in the third grade!"* One father commented *"This selfishness... my child should be better than that of others. Everyone is in a competition for that."* The key informants shared a similar view—the unhealthy environment of academic competition reflects a *"win at all costs mentality."* Children being discouraged to share their notes with their classmates and being taught to be okay that winning comes at the expense of others were pointed out as ways in which parents and teachers inculcate this culture. They also opined that the very reward systems in academic settings tend to convey such a message: *"clobber down your co-beings and this is the only way you can succeed."*

### *Parental Beliefs about Stress Levels in Children*

The parents were divided in their perception of academic stress or overload as experienced by their children. Some of them observed that the academic rigor is too much for their developmental age and shared the mental distress experienced by their children. *"She has headache in the mornings while going to school. She vomits when she reaches school."* *"She has it particularly during exam time and also when there is an overload of homework, when she gets tensed. When it is vacation she is free, and she has no headache or vomiting."* Other parents believed that there is not much of an overload in middle-school syllabus-wise, but that perhaps the number of projects and assignments are too demanding of the children to accomplish, or that several projects are given simultaneously. Some parents were of the view that the concept of overload is a myth

**Table 3** Results from the present study and comparable data from other studies

	Present study		Vleioras (2010), 3rd & 4th graders, Greece		Chen and Stevenson (1989), 3rd graders, Chicago	Chen and Stevenson (1989), 3rd graders, Beijing	Larson and Verma (1999), US	Mauldin and Meeks (1990); Timmer et al. (1985) Australia	Dandy and Nettelbeck (2002), 6th-7th graders, China	Dandy and Nettelbeck (2002), 6th-7th graders, China	Wagner et al. (2008), 5th-11th graders, Austria
	Mean time/day	% of time/day	Average time/day	% of time/week	Average time/day	Average time/day	Average time/day	Average time/day	Average time/WEEK	Average time/WEEK	Average time/WEEK
Sleep	8 h 6 min	33.75%	57 h 30 min	34.20%				9 h			
Study/homework	2 h 24 min	10%	17 h	10.10%	2 h 13 min	1 h 28 min			4 h 42 min	12 h	12 h 6 min
School hours	6 h	25%	36 h	21.40%							
Combined time for academic activities	8 h 24 min	35%	53 h	31.50%	8 h 27 min						
Play; physical/games	1 h 24 min	5.80%	10 h	6%	1 h 15 min		3 h				
Entertainment/media/computerized games	1 h 36 min	6.70%	12 h	7.10%	1 h 22 min		30 min to 4 h 6 min				
							1 h 48 min to 2 h 36 min				

perpetuated by parents and that children's perception of overload depends on the parental narrative. One father seemed to believe that children adapt and develop competencies according to the demand. He opined that what we deem as an overload may be a normal thing for children since they are used to such a regime since childhood.

#### *Cultivating Interests and Academic Orientation in Children*

Certain responses from parents regarding the leisurely pursuits of their children indicate that they attempt to create an academically oriented home environment, which may or may not be accompanied by academic pressure. Many of the parents reported that their children liked to read certain kinds of books, watch certain kinds of television shows, and play certain games that are educational in nature. A mother shared how she would procure and install quiz and word games that she sees with someone, for her son to play on her mobile.

Even within the spectrum of choices that fall under co-curricular activities, some parents seemed to encourage, and at times urge against their child's wishes, to pursue those non-academic pursuits that have some association with intellectual abilities. In one instance, a mother seemed to want the child to participate in elocution and speech events among the cultural-art-literary competitions, as these events have a certain academic flavor to them. This is in tandem with the verbalizations of some of the children, who expressed disappointment with their parents forcing a certain type of activity on them despite expressing their disinterest in it.

Some parents' responses indicated that a conscious effort is taken to mold their children's thinking and interests to academically oriented life goals. When asked about what kind of a career she thinks might suit her child, one mother said: *"I usually... science, research that kind of a field, I tend to talk to him in such a way that his focus comes to that kind of a field. Because it's something I'm interested in, and looking at its social aspect, and all that I talk to him so that he gets interested in that."*

#### *Tracing Social and Historical Reasons for the Academic Preoccupation*

A parent shared her understanding of why parents from a certain generation uphold educational attainment in such high regard: *"What I could not become I will make my children—that's a thing with today's parents. Some of those who have studied with me who didn't pay much heed to education, they are now forcing their kids to excel in studies. They couldn't become anything so now their kids should become..."* This adds to the key informants' observations that often parents displace their unmet dreams

onto their children and that they seek to experience a vicarious fulfillment. The key informants also extrapolated the academic rat race to a larger race toward material life, as academic attainment is seen as a pathway for development and prosperity. They opined that the trend is typical of many third world countries where people choose professional careers that are believed to have a good scope in the job market, so that they may be able to migrate abroad, earn well, and better their standards of living.

The key informants contextualized the evolution of the culture of preoccupation with academics in the larger historical and socio-political development of Kerala. The advent of entrance examinations as an entry into professional courses and the mass popularization of the medical and engineering professions were identified to be a major impetus. *"People adopted a notion that future prospects would be bright only if the child pursues these professional courses, and gradually a downfall of humanities, social sciences, and the liberal arts came about."* They remarked that early preparation and gearing up for the entrances became a decided mentality of parents which trickled down to academic pressure even in lower classes. Another factor they identify as having played a major role in bringing about this change in mentality is the mushrooming of unaided English medium schools in the 80s–90s period. *"The vernacular medium then began to be seen as lower in standards and everybody sought admission for their children in English medium schools."*

## Discussion

The findings from the time-use study complement the qualitative data from the interviews with children. Descriptions of their daily routines indicated that they spend most of their evening time after school in study-related activities. Children were found to spend an average of 2 h 42 min per day studying, over and above school hours. The children voiced that they do not get enough time to play with friends, both at school and afterward. The average of 1 h 24 min of daily play, calculated including the little time children found during their school breaks, appears meager in comparison with their peers from other countries (Larson & Verma, 1999). Notably, they were found to spend a higher amount of time watching television, playing computer games, social media, etc., vis-à-vis physical play and exploration. This pattern is also in tandem with what the children shared about their sources of entertainment and the time they spend online.

Middle childhood is characterized by the development of peer relationships and developmental researchers argue that children learn to socialize through play (Bordova & Leong, 1996). Playing with peers promotes negotiation,

social skills, and the adoption of cultural practices and trends (Howards et al., 2017). Break times at school, the physical education period, the commute back home, the time allowed to play in the neighborhood, and vacation days where they meet their cousins are the spaces opportune for peer interaction, and these are the times that the children spoke of with much enthusiasm. However, the children stated that these times and spaces are often short-lived and displaced by academic activities. The lack of priority given to play in the school environment is evident from Venkiteshwaran and Sivadasan's (2000) report on the public education system in Kerala. They found that the building of other infrastructural facilities often supersedes the provision of playgrounds. And in schools facing a space crunch, it was observed that the designated play area was utilized for the parking of vehicles. They reported that the majority of students are not satisfied with their school playgrounds but find themselves unable to protest against it (Venkiteshwaran & Sivadasan, 2000). Not being able to play has been found to increase negative emotions and anxiety in children (Howards et al., 2017).

Children from the present sample received an average of eight hours of sleep, which is less than the recommended 9 to 11 h for children their age. Mathew et al. (2019) found that private school students from Kerala had inadequate hours of sleep, delayed bedtime, and early wake-up time compared to students from public schools. Notably, the decrease in sleeping time was also associated with the level of parental education. Their findings suggest that children with parents that emphasize academic pursuit and activities tend to have less sleeping time.

### Adult Regulation of Children's Autonomy and Activities

Apart from directing children how they ought to spend their time, parental influence is exercised through the creation of home environments that promote academic pursuit; regulating the type of books, games, and other activities the child has access to. Educational games and activities characterized by instrumentality (to learn a concept, improve general knowledge, etc.) were found to be promoted. Menon (2007) purports that the emphasis given to academics has contributed to the lack of diversity in children's reading habits in Kerala, as the system considers textbooks as the primary reader, and other genres of reading material tend to be sidelined. In the context of schools, Backe-Hansen (2002) remarks that the dialectic of responsibility and regulation by teachers is pre-defined and less open for negotiations. Such structured spaces further adult agendas, and perpetuate larger cultural norms surrounding children's education and daily lives. The children's expressions about the classroom, peer interactions,

and school activities reflect an internalization of their teacher's and parent's notions about how they ought to behave. But instances illustrated how children would attempt to challenge adult-imposed regulations. One of the girls gleefully shared how her classmate had once cleverly thwarted a rule against speaking the local language, defaulters having to pay a fine of five Rupees. "*One of the boys in class wanted to speak in Malayalam, so he went ahead and gave the teacher 5 Rupees and talked as much Malayalam as he wanted!*".

Children's autonomy is often overlooked and adults' interactions with them tend to take on a guiding or instructing nature. This reflects a belief that the child is a lesser being that needs guidance. Speaking about his future aspirations one of the children remarked "*I don't know now. I think I'll know more clearly what I want to study later when I grow up more.*" Instances such as these reflect that children also borrow the adults' notion that childhood is a pre-state or a phase of becoming an adult. Such a conception may run the risk of children's interests being overpowered by those of adults (Cassidy et al., 2017). Children may then engage only in agreeable pursuits, have suitable career aspirations, and spend time in appropriate ways. Not all cultures engage in such regulation of children's activities. In Gaskin's (2000) culturally grounded description of children's daily life in a Mayan village, the researcher posits a cultural principle of *independence of child motivation* whereby there is little attempt from the parents to organize or influence their children's engagement in activities. Children are expected to find something to do on their own, and in general, are given greater freedom to decide what they want to do.

### Socio-Cultural Rootedness of the Academic Pre-Occupation

The marked preoccupation with academic activities indicates a certain proclivity of society. Vleioras (2010) discusses the Hellenic society's tendency to prioritize certain developmental tasks for children, i.e., school-related activities, the propensity of the Hellenic education system to equate success with knowledge, and how as a result of this children are expected to spend more time acquiring knowledge at the expense of other activities. The themes from the present study suggest similar underlying belief systems in Kerala. The concept of Socially Oriented Academic Motivation (SOAM) may be applicable here (Tao & Hong, 2013). SOAM holds that, particularly in collectivistic cultures, the standards of academic goals, actions, and means of pursuing these goals, and the value placed on the outcomes are determined not by the individual alone but influenced by significant others and the society.

Kunjumon (2019) argues that the cultural capital of parents in Kerala, and their level of education and occupation play an important role in the level of educational aspirations of parents for their children, their involvement in education, career-related decisions, in the creation of home environments conducive for educational attainment and in the provision of learning support and exposure through facilities and materials for their children. Parents attempt to make up for their lost opportunities through their children, transferring onto them their unfulfilled aspirations. With reference to marginalized mothers from Kerala sending children to English medium schools, Mathew (2018) posits that aspiring through their children is their means of negotiating their memories of deprivation and yearnings for a good future. The parents' memories of their Malayalam medium schooling are associated with capital deprivation, and they re-imagine a future where there is a possibility of their children advancing to more valued social standing through English medium education. On similar lines, Valatheeshwaran & Khan (2017) also note that less-educated Muslim parents who migrated to the Gulf and are now well off tend to send their children to expensive, English medium private schools. Sriram and Navalkar (2012) have also looked at fathers wanting and pushing their children to become more successful than they could; an inter-generational transaction of hopes and aspirations. Higher education is viewed as the means of being exonerated from low economic and social status (Narayanan, 2012). Making sacrifices for their children's education is a common theme among parents of Kerala. Education is deemed to be worth making sacrifices for, considering the future economic prospects and expected social mobility; it is an investment for the next generation and a site of cultural capital (Osella & Osella, 2000).

In conclusion, the daily time-use patterns of children from the present study suggest that children's allocation of time to developmentally important activities such as play and sleep are being displaced by academic activities. Parents and teachers largely regulate the way they spend time at home and school. The socio-cultural ecologies overemphasize one domain of development—the intellectual or academic. The child is constantly exposed to behaviors and systemic practices that purport this goal across physical and social spaces. The pervasive culture is present within the family, at the school, in the public, and consequentially, internalized within the child's psyche.

## Limitations

One of the major limitations of the current study is that the qualitative section has not tapped into the voices of city-dwelling children, where children are reportedly

experience more pressure to perform. Further, there is no assurance that these voices give a comprehensive glimpse into the multiple realities of childhood even within the selected context.

The method used for the time-use study may have certain methodological limitations. There is some amount of subjectivity involved in the data analysis; in the approximation of hours spent by a child in each category. Due to the presence of secondary activities and multiple responses in each hour slot, the author had to approximate the distribution of 24 h to the categories. The author's engagement with the children during the collection of time-use data has enhanced the understanding of how their days are structured, and it is hoped that this has informed the approximation process. Another limitation in terms of the analysis would be the extrapolation of time spent per week. The data collected are for a typical school day, and the pattern of weekend time use is unavailable. The author has used data from the interviews to approximate the hours for different activities and made a generalized correction. Other limitations include the possibility of social desirability in the children's responses, the likelihood of copying responses from another, and errors in recollection.

The authors would also like to remind readers that the data for the present study were collected before the Covid-19 pandemic. Needless to say, day to day lives of children has since drastically changed. Children's modes of learning, interaction with peers, and how they keep themselves occupied have all been affected on a systemic scale. The findings and discussions of this study are hence to be read with a temporal focus on pre-Covid experiences of children.

## Implications and Suggestions

The findings highlight the need to recognize that physical and psycho-social aspects of development should not come secondary to cognitive development. Schools must give due importance to play, physical activities and allocate ample time and spaces for students to engage in these activities. Practices that maximize the process of learning within school hours should be encouraged as it opens up time for children to engage in other pursuits. Developing educational policies that allow for a piece-meal and spread-out approach to syllabus coverage and assessment would greatly lessen the academic burden on children. Educators need to re-evaluate the developmental feasibility and instrumentality of projects and homework assigned. Teacher training must adopt a child rights perspective and teachers must be sensitized about the repercussions of the use of humiliation and fear for disciplining. The continuing fixation of society on select professions as ideal career



choices and the reality of disillusioned students and unemployed graduates compels for sensitization of society regarding career choices and decision-making. Cultural practices and rooted beliefs may take time to be reformed. However, awareness building and sensitization grounded in the current realities and theories of child development can be delivered through schools as target spaces.

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**Availability of data and material** The audio-recorded interviews are available with the first author. The response sheets for the quantitative study have been digitized and available as well.

**Code availability** Not applicable.

#### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Ethics approval** The present study was conducted after approval from a review committee at the School of Human Ecology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, which also evaluated the research work periodically.

**Consent to participate** Informed consent was obtained in written from all the participants interviewed in this study. For minors, written consent was obtained from their parents. For the quantitative data collection, the consent was obtained from concerned authorities at the schools from which the data were collected.

**Consent for publication** The manuscript is not under consideration for publication in another journal, nor has it been submitted elsewhere previously. The authors consent to the publication of this manuscript in the Journal of Psychological Studies should the paper be accepted.

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