

There is more to school than just grades

SUBAH NUZHAT HUSSAIN

What's more stressful than exams? Waiting for the day results come out.

Parents wear their children's academic success like a badge of honour. The higher the score, the better. It has gotten to a point where academics trumps everything, especially the things we care about most.

Even the most cynical non-believer becomes a devout believer before results come out. Considering how much of our freedom rides on a single number, it's not surprising how academics can be a source of stress and anxiety.

You could excel at other activities. You could be an ace at sports. You could rival the best dancers on screen. Your painting could put renaissance artists to shame. All of that would mean nothing in the eyes of society if your grades suffered in the process.

Academics first, passion second. Academics always takes precedence and it can grate on a child's self-esteem and stress them out. When grades are high, you have the freedom to pursue your passion, but when they sink...

No football. No cricket. No dance. No art. No music. No extracurriculars. Not until the grades go back up.

After-school activities get replaced by



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extra coaching classes or sessions with a tutor. Study time takes over playtime. Textbooks replace novels. Anything to pull those grades back up.

Hard work isn't good enough if your grades do not reflect that. Extracurriculars get cancelled as punishment. Whatever motivation that some had towards school dwindles fast. Cancelling the one thing that keeps them going will not

help some raise their grades.

Even teachers will tell remarkably talented athletes or artists to give up on their passions in order to focus on their grades. Schools evaluate students based on their grades. No other metrics exist to evaluate their growth.

When you aren't given the recognition you deserve and when your talents aren't being nurtured, it is easy to feel like you

are at the bottom of a chasm with no way out. It slowly chips away from your self-confidence. It feels like you're wading through quicksand. The harder you struggle, the faster you sink.

Not everyone is destined to be a doctor or an engineer like our parents envisioned. Numbers don't make sense to everyone. Memorisation is a chore. There are other ways to make a living that don't require stellar grades.

Some people are gifted with academic prowess, some are quick on their feet, others are gifted with dexterity. Our brains aren't wired the exact same way. No two people are alike. Even identical twins have different personalities. You cannot expect everyone to be good at the exact same thing.

To ask someone to give up everything that sparks joy in order to prioritise schoolwork prevents them from becoming skilled at something they are passionate about. It reinforces the notion that grades are everything and you are a failure when they fall.

Grades are important but so is everything else.

Subah contemplates the meaning of life and existence until the sunrises. Contact her on Twitter @hussain_subah

An open letter to our teachers

SABIBA HOSSAIN

Dear teachers,

First, accept my appreciation for your position. What you do isn't easy. I felt it the time I went to tutor my sister and ended up tearing my hair out. I felt your dedication when you introduced us to some new math, a structure, or a formula and I thought you were telling the story for the first time – but you weren't. You told the same story repeatedly, batch after batch, and you never showed any sign of annoyance.

Perhaps we failed to exceed your expectations when we didn't do well on that particular exam. Perhaps we tried and failed, or perhaps our negligence put us up to our demise.

But, should you have yelled at us that way? Not everyone functions the same way. Some of us could tolerate humiliation and move on; some of us would carry it our whole life, like a deep scar.

I know it was never your intention to hurt us. But human minds are emotional, sensitive, and vulnerable. I know you wanted to motivate us by scolding that one student for their imperfect grades, but what about their mental state afterwards? Did their grades drop? Were they able to obtain better grades at the price of their mental health? Did anyone check up on them?

I am not blaming you or trying to spread hatred. I am aware of the world we are living in. Where straight A's and GPA 5's seem to determine your eligibility and your status. Everyone posts updates, takes pictures, and congratulates each other on result day. The ones who don't do as well



feel left out, isolated. And I know how you, teachers, think of us as families and don't want us to face disappointment.

But does one exam determine our skills and abilities? Should you use this approach for your students? How about comforting them, telling them it's going to be okay? You are already under immense pressure throughout the year teaching and creating exam materials, and you want to say you are exhausted at our inabilities.

Look at us. We too are learning this

for the first time. And not all of us have the same potential. Some of us already feel insecure and inadequate because our peers are winning medals, going into competitions, and achieving great results in exams – while we couldn't do one job of studying properly. Some of us are scared because we put effort into something we liked besides education, and now our grades are falling. But we are trying, like you want us to, to reach a better destination and succeed in life.

We respect and admire you for your

courage to choose this profession. But in times like this, when you strike a student with word after word, we lose hope. Please, my respected teachers, give us time and space to grow. We are young and it is our nature to make errors. If you forgive us for our falling grades and treat us with care, trust us, nothing will go wrong.

Sabiba is a Hufflepuff who plans to go into hibernation every winter but never succeeds. Send her fantasy book recs at fb.com/Sabibra

Online Education: A failed experiment?

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

Back in September 2020, a *Harvard Business Review* article suggested that a shift to a digital learning environment was long overdue, and the pandemic had made it possible for US schools to take that leap. The following year, *The Guardian* talked about online learning and how it was ready to make education more accessible to younger people.

What I can tell from all these optimistic headlines is that most of the developed world was rather excited to see how an online-based education system would pan out. To them, this revolution was a step in the right direction.

Many North American and European institutes made the most out of this system, while many others failed. In Bangladesh, it was rather one-sided. Needless to say, our students did not welcome this new system with open arms, especially since they had no idea what to expect, lacked resources, and were often met with incompetence from the academia.

After almost one and a half years of online learning, as we gradually return to classrooms, we ask again. Do we have what it takes to adapt to a completely online-based education system? If not, what are we doing wrong?

"Most students are finding the online semesters to be quite stressful," says Samiha Haque, lecturer at the Department of Computer Science & Engineering (CSE), Brac University (BracU). "While viva voce and regular assignments test students' progress, and help them cover the syllabus, it is also making them face back-to-back deadlines with barely any spare time."

Students here lack the resources to participate in online classes without a hitch. One of the major issues in this regard is the lack of high-speed internet, especially in the rural areas, which is why BracU built an e-learning platform of its own. However, was this enough?

"Pre-recorded lectures take time to watch, but they are helpful for the students since not everyone is blessed with good internet connectivity for attending the live sessions," says Samiha. "They can also skip live sessions and prioritise their personal emergencies without worrying about losing points for attendance or not understanding a topic because of it."

"However, many students watch the recorded lectures just days before their deadlines or exams," she adds. "Hence, they don't have time to clear out their confusions or fully grasp the topic. Also, sometimes making and recording some new content in between semesters is difficult due to time constraints."

BracU did not, however, completely abandon live classes. They were still being conducted, but most students did not show up as attendance was not mandatory (at least not during the early days of the pandemic). This is another reason why Samiha and other BracU faculty members feel that their students could not make the most out of this system.

Most university students have complaints against virtual live sessions. They say most instructors do not know how to make use of the technology to conduct these classes. However, these students often forget that many of these teachers did not grow up surrounded by such technology.

Samiha is new to the teaching profes-



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

tion; she was already acquainted with the online tools. On the other hand, for senior teachers and professors, adjusting to this new system did prove to be a challenge. Yet, many of them adapted to this new environment over time, but eventually failed to make full use of it because of lack of interest from the students.

"Online learning was not a complete struggle, but there were initial learning and technical teething problems," comments Dr. Jawadur Rahim Zahid, Senior Professor at the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka (IBA, DU). "With time I could somehow devise a minimum make-shift way of delivering lectures. However, the students were hardly cooperative."

Dr. Zahid has been teaching for 32 years. Even after three decades in the profession, he welcomed the new method for the benefit of his students. Likewise, many other instructors actively learned new skills for their jobs.

However, even they are not sure about whether or not online learning has a future in Bangladesh.

"Online learning could never replace the in-person teaching experience," adds Dr. Zahid. "At best, it can restructure the distance learning courses that we used to have before the pandemic."

And what about the students? How has their experience of shifting to an entirely online learning system been?

One major obstacle of online learning is finding a way to incorporate practical lessons or laboratory work. While lab classes

that involve use of equipment, chemicals for example, could not be conducted online, it was still possible to do so for some engineering students. "It is hard to replicate a practical class online," says final-year BracU student Abdullah. "However, given the circumstances, I will not claim I was disappointed by the way my university conducted those classes."

What was important in these online classes was that faculty members and university staff maintain proper communication with their students. To some extent, many colleges and universities (or at least specific departments) were able to achieve that. "We not only received adequate technical support from the department, but enough emotional support as well, which was important given that we were living in the midst of a raging pandemic," states Abdul Mohaimen Al Radi, an engineering student from the University of Dhaka. "Overall, I think it was a pretty fair effort from their end."

Abdullah shares the same sentiment, as does Joyita Faruk, a sophomore from the CSE department at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). "Most faculty members were responsive," recalls Joyita. "They also provided us with their personal contact numbers and tutorial hours on Google Meet. Some of them even had us open social media groups which they kept in contact with through class representatives."

Despite all the efforts from the universities' end, students were still unsatisfied. The main reason behind this was how universities, at times, failed to stay true to their words. "Although they tried to keep their promises, the authorities were caught up between maintaining a good standard of education and making things easier for its students," says Abdullah. "More often than not, students had to keep up with multiple, unrealistic deadlines in order to survive, which was never the initial plan."

Joyita's experience hints towards the same reality. "I personally think teachers and the authority were more understanding initially, but later, they simply increased the workload to exorbitant amounts that it felt like they started seeing our time at home as free time for more coursework," she says. "For some reason, IUB gave us a shorter semester break than usual. Hence, a lot of students were burned out and had little time to recover."

Therefore, we can reach a conclusion where most students prefer in-person classes to online learning. As Mohaimen explains it, "Online classes feel like a badly orchestrated MOOC with real grade consequences. I do not have any issues with online education. However, I do not prefer it. If given the choice, I would definitely choose to be in the classroom."

In contrast, the few students who would pick online learning, like Abdullah, would only do so for personal circumstances. Abdullah is dependent on online learning at the moment because of certain situations in his personal life. Had things been any different, he too would have opted for in-person classes.

At this stage, one might feel that everyone is pointing fingers at one another. It is anything but true. Every stakeholder in this online learning situation seems to have their own reasons why things are not working out. The reasons explained and situations discussed so far are very real, and everyone who has been a part of this learning system has faced one of those situations at least.

Hence, we end up circling back to the question – where did we go wrong with online education? Was online education just a failed experiment, something we just dived into because the time called for it? It probably was, because we are yet to be convinced by its benefits.

References

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