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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

SSC EXAM RESULTS

# What do the numbers mean?



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More than two million children – girls slightly outnumbering boys – sat for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination this year. Results were published on July 28, which showed an average pass rate of 80.39 percent for the nine general education boards and the equivalent one technical and one madrasa education board. Almost nine percent of the examinees obtained the top score of grade point average (GPA) 5 – again, girls surpassed boys. This is reason enough for the satisfaction of the education authorities.

The SSC exam at the end of 10 years of schooling is a milestone in children's education journey and a cause for much anxiety for both children and their parents. The result has a large influence on further education and occupational courses for the child. Given its importance, what the numbers related to the results, collectively for society and personally for each child, mean is a legitimate question. The answer is not all that clear.

Those who have earned the top score of GPA 5 are happy and deserve to be congratulated. However, despite their good performance, all may not be able to enrol in preferred institutions or subjects at the tertiary stage of education. The combined performance at SSC and the next level of higher secondary certificate (HSC) examinations earn them only a ticket to sit for the admission test for institutions and subjects of their choice. The concerned education authorities, public or private, apparently do not have enough confidence in the SSC and HSC results to rely on these when selecting their students.

Moreover, to what extent do the top scorers' performance represent the performance of their schools and teachers? Private tutoring and coaching, even at expensive private schools, have become the norm. Time, effort, and money have to be spent by the students' parents to help prepare their children for the milestone public exams. Students and their parents are largely on their own in ensuring a fair start in life for the former. The large majority, whose families cannot muster the resources or are not capable of guiding and helping their children themselves, does not have that fair chance in life – an injustice to the children and a loss to the nation as a whole.

It is the plight of the 90-plus percent of the students not obtaining the coveted high scores – their educational opportunities and their life chances – that is the

true measure of performance in the school system. Public exams such as SSC and HSC can be an important measure of student learning when they meet two criteria: validity and reliability of the measurement. Without going into technicalities, the validity of a test is about whether the content and items of questions in the test represent the knowledge and skills learners are expected to acquire and whether the tests actually measure students' level of those skills and knowledge. Reliability refers to getting the same results when the tests are repeated. On both counts, the public exams are suspect and public perception about the results reflects that doubt. Not relying on the results in deciding admission of students to institutions at the next level of education and the great variation of aggregate results across education boards and across years raise these doubts.

In 2021, at the waning phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, the SSC exam

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was held on a shortened syllabus for elective subjects only, inexplicably leaving out the core subjects of Bangla, English, and Math. The pass rate jumped to 93.58 percent. Tests on a shortened syllabus in 2022 also showed a high aggregate pass rate of 87.44 percent. Poor scores in English and Math have been mentioned by the education minister as reasons behind the low performance this year, even though the syllabus was again truncated for the tests. There were not enough school days to teach the total lesson content after the post-Covid resumption of classes.

The test results varied in part based on what was decided to be tested from year to year – a challenge to validity of tests. The range of scores for the different boards varied substantially. This year, for example,

among the nine general education boards, the average pass rate for Barishal is 90.18 percent, compared to 76.06 percent for Sylhet. Is it plausible that such a large difference in results is caused by a wide gap in the quality of instruction and performance of schools between the two divisions? There seems to be no good explanation except for a probable test reliability issue. Maintaining validity and reliability of large-scale tests are always a challenge, and call for continuing research and analysis of tests and modifying them accordingly by competent specialists.

Education commentators John Richards and Shahidul Islam cited a recent report of *The Economist* magazine, which outlined how India was doing a terrible job of ensuring that youngsters who thronged its classrooms pick up essential skills, and that much of this critique applied to other South Asian countries including Bangladesh. In *The Daily Star*, the two commentators wrote, "...we need an independent research initiative [in Bangladesh]... for the evaluation of students' learning and the system's performance."

When a foundation is not built of basic skills of reading and counting at the primary level for most students, the effect of this lingers. As part of Education Watch Report 2022, an assessment of students' learning performance was undertaken by administering a 90-minute test each on Bangla, English, and Math, with a sample of Class 8 and Class 9 students. The tests were prepared based on the Class 8 syllabus, deliberately pitching the items at a "middle level" of difficulty. The overall result showed that 36 percent of Class 8 students and 33.5 percent of Class 9 students obtained very low scores of below 40 percent. The scores for the two classes on tests based on the Class 8 syllabus suggest that there is a cumulative adverse effect on student learning, most likely due to the pandemic-induced school closure.

It would be reasonable to assume, given the moderate level of difficulty of the test, that most of the students (80 percent or more) should obtain letter-grade scores equivalent to GPA 3 to 5. The reality was that over two-thirds did not meet this expectation. Moreover, how reasonable is the practice of accepting a 33 percent score as a passing grade? This suggests that a student is regarded as performing adequately at grade level even if she/he has yet to learn two-thirds of the content of a subject specified for the grade.

A detailed analysis of the SSC results is likely to show a similar pattern of student performance as was found in the Education Watch study. Is this level of learning outcome from our schools acceptable? It is relevant to ask how the introduction of the ambitious new school curriculum will work unless the various obstacles to grade level performance of students are recognised and addressed.

# The World Cup that keeps on giving



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Defending World Cup Champions, the US, are out. Olympic champions, Canada: gone. South American champions, Brazil: crashed out. Germany: dumped in the group stages. Spain was goal-shy and shocked. European champions, England, struggled against Haiti. The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup has undoubtedly been the most open one ever.

Kicking off just a fortnight ago, the tournament has kept up with the theme of the 2022 men's World Cup – there have been goals, epic celebrations, shocks of grand proportions, and the unexpected rise of underdogs. This World Cup has been the gift that keeps giving.

The very first night, an inspired New Zealand (co-hosts with Australia) shocked the tournament's dark horse, Norway, and won their first World Cup match. When the final whistle blew, Eden Park stadium broke into euphoria. Captain Ali Riley's passionate and heartfelt post-match interview made headlines. "The energy helped us get through it. This morning, something really tragic happened," said Riley, referring to the shooting incident that had taken place just hours before kick-off, causing numerous fatalities, in downtown Auckland. "We wanted to bring something positive tonight. And we thought of the victims and the first responders, and they made us so proud. And we wanted to just help

Cup, her brilliance and leadership gave Ireland a faint hope of winning its first ever World Cup match. Scoring directly from the corner, an "Olimpico," in the first six minutes, McCabe set the entire stadium ablaze in jubilation. Nigeria, on the other hand, one of many teams that have fought tooth and nail against their Federation for support and finance, silenced the co-host Australia with

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a win that will live long in African football folklore. Nouhaila Benzina of Morocco made history as the first player to wear a hijab while competing at a senior-level global tournament. She stood firm against the tirade of South Korean attacks and inspired her country to its first ever World Cup victory. A few days later, the Morocco team's resilience



Brazil's Marta gives the first kick of the match against Jamaica on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

bring something amazing today."

The now-eliminated most successful women's national team, the US, kicked off its campaign against debutants Vietnam. On paper and logically, this was the most uneven matchup. And while a three-nil scoreline does not flatter Vietnam, it does reflect the brilliance of Vietnamese keeper, Tran Thi Kim Thanh, who made several important saves to keep the scoreline down. When England took on Haiti, they were made to work extremely hard for the three points. Haiti's 19-year-old Melchie Dumornay mesmerised the crowd with her speed, tactics, and physicality which seemed way beyond her age and maturity.

Colombia put on a show that deserves its laurels. Beating South Korea and then serving one of the shocks of the tournament by beating Germany, Linda Caicedo let herself become known on the biggest stage in women's football. Just 18 years old, Caicedo has played three World Cups this year: U18, U20, and now the Women's World Cup. If that was not inspiring enough, Caicedo's story is even more profound beyond football. Hers is a story of resilience, perseverance, and self belief, which helped the youngster recover from cancer at the age of 15. There is a reason why her first coach said, "Caicedo is one of those people who was touched by God, who was born for this."

Katie McCabe of Ireland is a natural-born leader. Helping her country qualify for its first World

helped them secure a spot in the last sixteen, at the expense of Germany. Germany, which has never lost before the Quarters, was tripped by Morocco – a team that has never even been at the World Cup before.

When Japan took on Spain, some expected the game to end the way it did. Spain's most talented generation of midfielders, including two-time Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas and this year's frontrunner Aitana Bonmati, struggled to break through Japan's defensive structure. Japan had four shots on target, and all four ended up in the back of the net. Portugal, another debuting team, played inspiring football and came agonisingly close to winning and knocking the US out in the final group match. The US' saviour in that game was the goalpost that prevented a Portuguese shot from going in, just five minutes before full time. South Africa, a team that has often been subjected to lopsided scorelines against itself, broke through new boundaries. They beat Italy to secure a place in the round of 16 for the first time in their history.

Panama, which took on France in the last game of the group stages, began the game with a stunning free kick goal from Marta Cox, who curled into the top corner just 65 seconds after kick-off. Cox's emotions flowed across the field and her entire team ran to her. Scenes that are usually reserved for when one wins a match were displayed

despite them already being knocked out of the tournament. At that moment, it did not matter. Some of these players probably never imagined that one day they would be playing on such a big stage. Despite going on to lose 6-3, their determination, and the thrill they exuded while playing, never faded – and the fans loved it. In fact, at one point, even some French supporters wanted the referee to give Panama a goal, just to witness the purity of the happiness it brought to the team's fans and players.

Often, a World Cup match will leave you feeling divided. Brazil had to win their final group match in order to advance. Before the tournament, the legendary Marta, one of the most decorated players to ever play, announced this would be her last World Cup. After their 2022 Copa America win, many (including myself) believed that this would be their year; that perhaps Marta, too, would have her "Messi moment," and that her legacy would be complete. Then again, when does football really go the way you want it to? Brazil's opposition, Jamaica, who had not conceded a single goal in the tournament so far, had its own adversaries to face. Since 2008, the team has been disbanded, defunded, and ignored. In 2014, Bob Marley's daughter, Cadella Marley, received a flyer from her son's school coach, asking for donations to help restart the women's football team. She did everything in her power to help the "Reggae Girls." And yet, their federation continued failing them, cutting off funding, and making them play against local clubs to save money instead of playing other countries. A few months prior to the tournament, a player's mother set up a GoFundMe page to help the team finance its journey to Australia. Now, the Jamaica team has made everyone

take notice of them as they withstood the torrent of crosses Brazil put into their box. When the final whistle blew, Jamaica's coach ran around attempting cartwheels like he had promised to if they made it to the knock-out stages. Khadija "Bunny" Shaw fell to the floor and broke into tears as Marta, dejected but somehow still content, walked up to her. For a few long minutes, the two attackers from two different countries, representing two different generations, both of whom had their own battles to fight, embraced each other. It was sportsmanship at its finest, where Shaw gave her condolences and perhaps even thanked Marta for the contribution she made to this beautiful game. After all, who can forget Marta's inspiring plea in 2019: "Women's football depends on you to survive."

As major shockwaves rumble through the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023, each as volcanic as the last, a newfound admiration is engulfing women's football. The tectonic plates of the sport are shifting, paving the way for a new generation of footballers to spread their wings. As we bid farewell to our Martas, Rapinoes, and Sinclairs, and welcome our Dumornays, Caicedos, and Shaws, it is essential to acknowledge those who came before and fought to elevate this beautiful game to its current heights and beyond. Everyone wanted to be Marta, and now anyone can be, because of Marta.