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RISING STARS

FOR YOUNG MINDS ON THE RISE

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THE LASTING SCARS OF SCHOOL BULLYING

ILLUSTRATION: **RAKEEB RAZZAQ**

DID YOU KNOW?

Mulan is Disney's DEADLIEST PRINCESS

PHOTO: REUTERS

Disney's Mulan might just be the deadliest character in cinematic history.

While iconic horror villains rack up high body counts, Jason Voorhees of *Friday the 13th* sits at roughly 160–170 kills, Freddy Krueger of *Nightmare on Elm Street* has around 63, and Clive Barker's *Pinhead* from Hellraiser tops the charts at 321, none come close to Mulan.

In a striking scene from the 1998 classic, Mulan (then known as Fa Ping) and her fellow soldiers under Captain Li Shang are ambushed while navigating a snowy mountain pass. Using strategic artillery, the protagonists halt the first wave of attackers, only for a staggering 2,000 Hun soldiers to charge down the slope. Calculations show that, during this brief but intense battle, Mulan and her comrades eliminate nearly 23 Huns every single minute.

Released on 19 June 1998, *Mulan* runs for 87 minutes, proving that, even in animated form, heroism can be deadly.

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South Point School & College, Baridhara, launches international English medium section

South Point School & College, Baridhara, recently inaugurated its international English medium section under the British curriculum. Introduced in the current academic year, the programme has already received an enthusiastic response. From playgroup to standard five, classes have commenced with 120 students. Following the Cambridge curriculum, lessons are conducted by experienced teachers, with a focus on fostering creativity through brainstorming-based teaching and assessment methods.

According to school authorities, the section will gradually expand to include O and A levels, while students from Grade Six onward will prepare for Cambridge Checkpoint examinations.

"Our goal is not to make students rote learners but to nurture them through enjoyable, reality-based, and pressure-free learning, so that they can become creative, humane individuals, achieve excellent results, and succeed holistically," said Air Commodore (Retd) Kazi Abdul Moin, Principal of South Point School & College. He added that sports, cultural practice, and other co-curricular activities are integral to building confident, ideal citizens.

WOLFWALKERS

An enchanting tale of the forces that make and break community

ABIR HOSSAIN

Amidst the slew of animated features that have come out in the past few years, *Wolfwalkers* stands out for multiple reasons. Owing to its lush 2D animation, every scene looks breathtaking. The movie wears its influence of Irish folklore on its sleeve, which the filmmakers turned to for the plot of the film as well as the visual language. What stands out, however, is how seamlessly these influences have been utilised to make for a retelling that compels contemporary viewers.

While the narrative itself is timeless, the political and social undertones feel especially relevant today. The movie explores precisely how regimes sow division not merely to reinforce a manufactured identity built on hate but also to exert dominance. As Lord Protector, the antagonist of the film, seeks to present an illusion of security in the town of Kilkenny, the protagonists — Robyn and Mebh — are forced to reckon with the prospect of losing their own community. In the process, their bond grows stronger and the tyranny that threatens them is exposed.

The spectrum of disruption that peer pressure presents

Though it is primarily perceived as a force of obstruction, peer pressure has the potential to be inspiring.

MAHPARA FAATIN

Most of the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis are heavily influenced by the decisions of our peers — from how we choose to dress and what we binge-watch to what we eat. Peer pressure affects people of all ages in various forms. However, when it decides what you do in your school-life, the impacts can be long-lasting.

Having to choose your own subjects for high school can be a daunting task. This single decision will, in all likelihood, dictate how your future takes shape. All this fear and confusion make people even more prone to giving in to peer pressure. If society hadn't already convinced them to take a science track with the promise of a "secure" future, seeing non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) classes full of unfamiliar faces further discourages them from choosing subjects they genuinely enjoy. The companionship and comfort of close friends often triumph over personal aspirations. After all, if everyone is doing it, it couldn't be bad for you, right?

Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean it's the right fit for you. Many students, unfortunately, realise this once it's already too late to change their minds. Peer pressure also impacts what clubs you join and what activities you do outside of the classroom. A catastrophic consequence of this choice manifests when applying for universities abroad. It may feel like grasping at straws when trying to demonstrate your proficiency and passion for said activity, and how it aligns with your subject choice.

One of the most significant disadvantages of peer pressure is its potential to encourage risky behaviour. Many students feel compelled to engage in activities they would otherwise avoid simply to gain acceptance. Even if they aren't necessarily drawn to said activity, and perhaps even views it as being at odds with their beliefs, the fear of social rejection can lead students to compromise their values, which can have long-term consequences.

Constantly trying to fit in can be mentally exhausting. The pressure to conform to social norms, maintain a particular image, or meet unrealistic standards can result in anxiety, low self-esteem, and even depression. Students who struggle to keep up with their peers may feel isolated or inadequate, negatively affecting their mental health and academic performance.

But, is peer pressure really the villain everyone paints it to be?

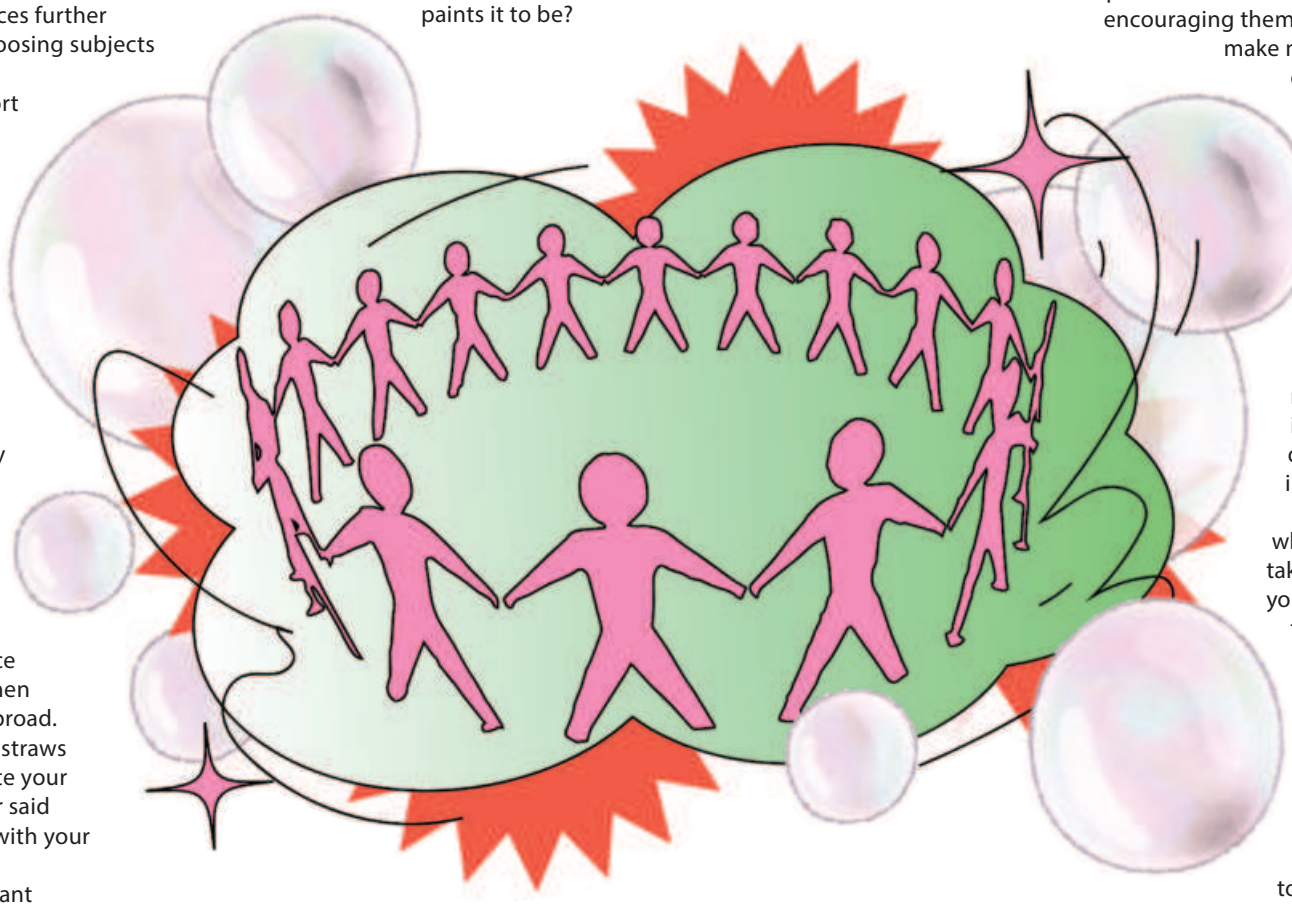

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

School life can be overwhelming, especially when your options are numerous and you have no clue what you're doing. Peer pressure often originates from the outcomes of the trial-and-error cycles the seniors before you walked through – helping you know which choice is truly worth your time. Sure, it might not cater to your passions, but are you even sure what your passion is? Peer pressure can, thus, actually keep you from making rash decisions that you could regret down the line.

When overwhelmed with choices, in fear of making the wrong choice, many make no choice at all. Peer pressure is crucial to ensure they don't waste the little free time they have doing nothing. Joining the science club might not have been their thing, but at least now they don't have to regret leaving their resume blank. Peer pressure also often pushes individuals out of their comfort zones, encouraging them to engage in social activities, make new friends, and express their opinions. This social exposure boosts confidence and helps students navigate different social situations effectively, preparing them for future interactions in both personal and professional settings.

Peer pressure has the capacity to guide you. What must be ensured, of course, is that it doesn't completely dictate your life. Trust your instincts and stand firm.

When you are truly sure what you wish to do in life, take that leap of faith. Maybe you will no longer be able to gossip with your best friend when the teacher isn't looking, but you can always catch up after classes. Compromises are a necessary part of growing up. Not everyone chooses the same path but that doesn't mean you have to walk alone. You'll always find new companions along the way.

Elections: Explained

As the cornerstone of democracy, all elections, regardless of their differences, must possess the attributes of being free, fair, and transparent. Most of these traits, however, were not a given.

BIPRA PRASUN DAS

In Bangladesh right now, it's hard to go a week without hearing about elections. Whether it's on the news, in a heated tea stall debate, or on your social media feed, the topic is the centre of the political climate. At first glance, the idea seems simple: people drop slips of paper into a box, the person with the most votes wins, and a new government is formed. Easy, right? Not really. While that's the basic idea, elections are more complex, and more consequential. They are one of the core rituals of democracy, the process through which many societies today decide who leads, which policies matter, and how power is shared.

At its simplest, an election is a process where people cast votes to make collective decisions. Instead of power being seized by force or inherited by bloodline, it's transferred peacefully through ballots. Beyond government, elections also show up in our everyday lives through student councils, unions, and residential societies. The principle is the same: when more than one voice needs to be heard, an election helps decide fairly.

Imagine your school is holding an election for student council positions. Perhaps a friend of yours chooses to run, and each class nominates a candidate.

Some candidates focus on improving the library, or sports facilities, while others promise small but meaningful changes, like pushing for a five-minute longer recess so students don't have to rush their lunch. On voting day, every student casts a ballot for the candidate they believe will best represent them. Even in this small-scale election, the process mirrors a national one: there's campaigning, competition, voter choice, and ultimately, a decision that impacts the community. Throughout this article, we'll keep this school election in mind, using it to show how elections work, why voting matters, and how systems of representation, campaigning, and fairness play out in real life.

Not all elections look alike. National elections usually decide who governs a country, that is, presidents, parliaments, or prime ministers. Local elections focus on mayors, councils, or school boards. Sometimes, citizens vote directly on issues rather than candidates, through referendums.

Each has its own rules, but the underlying idea is participation. Every election starts with a simple but important question: who gets to vote? Not everyone automatically has that right. In national elections, there are certain requirements pertaining to one's age, citizenship, or residency. In our school election, this could mean that only the students who are currently enrolled, and above a certain age or grade, can vote. This ensures the decision reflects the voices of those who are directly affected by it.

Voting itself usually means paper slips dropped into a box, or it might be electronic machines or online systems. The key is that every eligible voter has a safe and private way to make their choice.

But, after the campaigning and voting, how is the winner decided?

First past the post (FPTP)
This is the simplest system: whoever gets the most votes wins. Imagine your school election has three candidates: A, B, and C. Candidate A gets 40 votes, B gets 35, and C gets 25. Candidate A wins, even though 60 students voted for someone else. It's quick and easy, but it can leave a majority feeling unrepresented, especially if the winner didn't get more than half of all votes.

Proportional representation (PR)
PR tries to make results more reflective of everyone's preferences. Imagine four class representative spots are being contested, and three candidates are competing. If Candidate A's supporters make up 50% of the voters, they get two seats; Candidate B's supporters, 25%, get one seat; Candidate C's supporters, also 25%, get one seat. This way, the makeup of the council could better mirror the student body's opinions.

Ranked-choice voting (RCV)
Ranked-choice voting allows voters to rank candidates by preference. Suppose no candidate wins a majority initially. The one with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated, and their votes are redistributed to each student's second choice. In our school example, if Candidate C is eliminated first, the students who voted for C now see their votes go to their next preferred candidate. This continues until someone reaches a majority. RCV ensures the winner has broader support and isn't just someone who got a simple plurality.

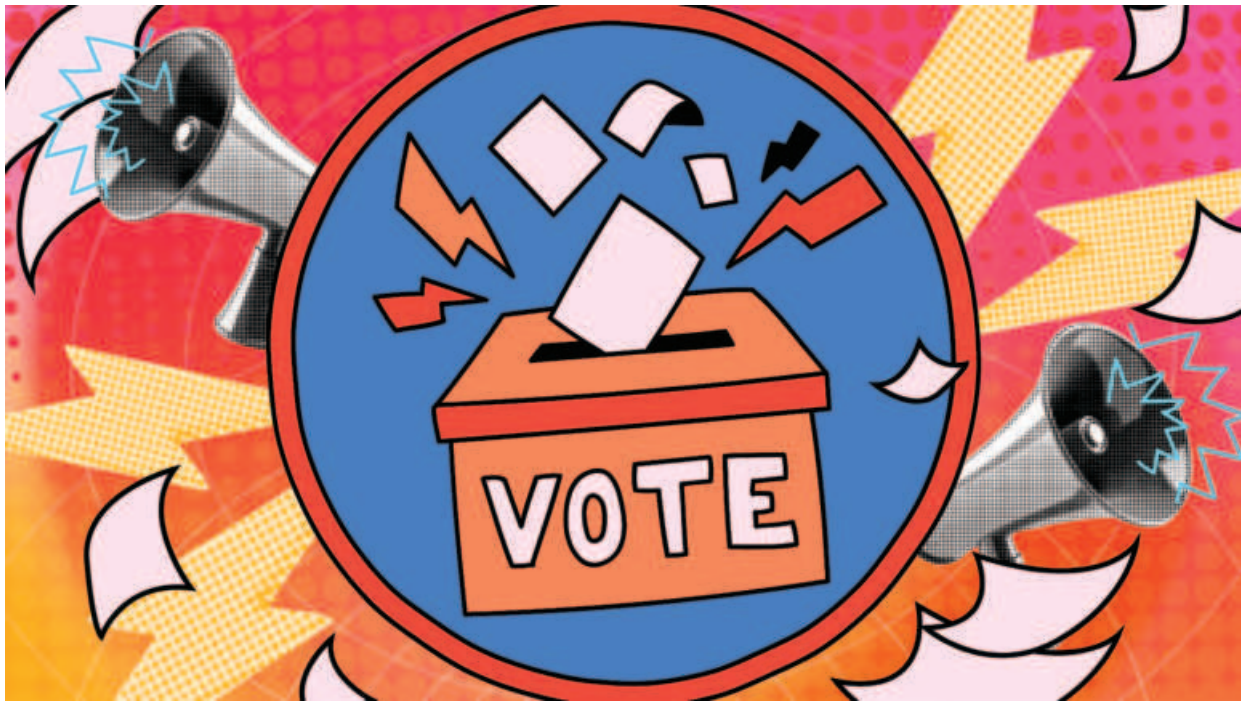

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

This shows that when it comes to elections, the rules of the game matter as much as the votes themselves. Which system is chosen can change who wins, how campaigns are run, and how fairly the community feels represented.

Before votes are cast, candidates campaign, which typically involves giving speeches, joining debates, flooding social media feeds, or knocking on doors. Campaigns require organisation, money, and media attention. Parties try to inspire loyalty, while candidates frame themselves as trustworthy, capable, or relatable. At the same time, ads, opinion polls, and endorsements all shape voter perceptions.

Ultimately, no election works without the voter. That means showing up, researching candidates and issues, and making informed choices. Voting isn't just a right; it's a responsibility.

For most of history, a lot of people were shut out of elections. In many countries, only wealthy men, usually of a certain race, class, or religion, had voting rights. Women, minorities, indigenous people, and the working class were excluded.

Now, imagine in your school election, only male students were eligible to vote. Female students still had to follow the council's rules, still had to live with the decisions made but their voices wouldn't count at the ballot box. Or imagine only students who scored more than eighty-five percent marks in the previous term were allowed to vote. The results would feel unfair, no matter how smoothly the election ran.

That was the reality for millions of people across history. The suffragettes fought for women's right to vote. Civil rights activists risked their lives to dismantle racist voter suppression. Colonised nations struggled to extend suffrage to all their citizens. Excluding people wasn't just unfair; it denied them a say in the rules that governed their lives. Today, universal suffrage, the principle of "one person, one vote", is seen as a cornerstone of fairness and equality.

What makes an election unfair? When some voices count more than others, whether through voter intimidation, rigged ballot boxes, biased rules, or excluding certain groups altogether. An election also becomes unfair if the process isn't transparent, if people can't freely choose without fear, or if the results don't reflect the real will of the voters. On the other hand, fair elections are built on equal access, honesty, and accountability. Every eligible voter gets the chance to participate, every vote is counted, and the process is open for all to see. Yet' even today, free and fair elections remain a distant dream in many parts of the world, where manipulation, corruption, or outright suppression continue to silence people's voices.

Elections may sound distant or abstract, but they shape nearly every aspect in our lives from education policies and job markets to climate action and civil rights. The fact that voting rights were once denied to so many makes the ballot all the more precious today. In the end, elections are more than slips of paper in a box; they are voices, choices, and one of the most important pillars of democracy.

Bipra Prasun Das is an undergraduate student at North South University.

The lasting scars of school bullying

NUSRAT MEHERIN FAIZA

Trigger Warning: Contains mention of physical, verbal, and psychological abuse.

As the school bell rang for tiffin break, Ramim quickly packed his bag, ran to the washroom, and locked himself in, hiding from the world around him. After the break, he quietly returned to class. Once school ended, he ran again, seeking solace behind a tree as if trying to disappear from everyone's view. He came home with a sad face each day, sometimes with fresh bruises on his knees. Yet, whenever anyone asked what was wrong, he sealed his lips, refusing to say a word.

Years later, as an adult, he is now struggling with self-doubt and anxiety. Recently, he decided to visit a therapist. During his session, he broke down in tears as he recalled the torment he went through in school, being bullied, body-shamed, and mocked for being thin and weak. He used to skip his tiffin breaks to avoid the bullies who would snatch his food, hit him after school, and ridicule him relentlessly; for no apparent reason. He couldn't share it with anyone back then.

Many children, from an early age, are bullied by their peers or seniors at school. Victims of such bullying are often unable to talk about their experiences because others may trivialise or dismiss them as nothing serious.

Bullying comes in many forms, including physical aggression, which can involve hitting or shoving, verbal abuse, like name-calling, teasing, or threats, as well as social manipulation, such as spreading rumors, exclusion, or intentional isolation. At present, bullying has found its way into the cyberspace as well. Bullying can frequently happen within friendship groups and is often dismissed as "banter".

"I remember I stopped going to school for a week after I got bullied for my height. Even though my school was very strict, they never cared enough about it," said Ashfaq*, a student of a renowned school in Dhaka.

Hasan*, now a university student, shared, "Back in school, I was often called names because I had a stutter. This severely damaged my confidence. As a result, I now find it very challenging to speak up in group settings or make new friends."

The US-based National Center for Education Statistics indicates that students who face bullying are more likely to achieve lower academic performance and are more likely to skip school. What makes bullying particularly damaging is that the victim or targeted person often feels powerless to defend themselves, leaving them vulnerable and isolated. Unlike a physical altercation, the emotional wounds of bullying linger, affecting the victim's self-esteem, social relationships, and mental health long after the bullying stops.

When a child grows up in environments like these, the effects of bullying can haunt them throughout their lives. They may become more introverted and often struggle with self-doubt and anxiety when trying to come out of their shells. Some individuals may choose to hide their true selves to avoid judgment.

Moreover, victims of bullying often struggle to concentrate in class. The fear of ridicule can lead to decreased participation and lower grades. This ongoing anxiety begins at an early age and has a significant impact on education.

Ariba*, a 25-year-old professional, shares her experience, "It started in sixth grade when I was mocked for being overweight. The constant teasing and name-calling made me feel invisible and worthless. Even now, I continue to struggle with body image issues and social anxiety in my workplace. I still think twice before posting pictures because the comments [made in the past] about me still haunt me."

One of the most common effects of bullying is anxiety and depression. Victims often carry the pain from their childhood experiences, remembering moments of embarrassment that lower their self-esteem and make it hard for them to trust others. In more serious cases, victims can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is usually linked to life-threatening situations. The British Psychological Society says that about 15 percent of people who were bullied show symptoms of PTSD, which included having flashbacks, being overly alert, and feeling numb. Unlike physical injuries, these emotional scars can be hard to see and may go untreated.

Bullying also has a considerable effect on one's future academic and career success. The self-doubt that starts in childhood can make it hard for people to take on opportunities at work, discuss their pay, or feel confident about themselves at work.

Bullying also has a considerable effect on one's future academic and career success. The self-doubt that starts in childhood can make it hard for people to take on opportunities at work, discuss their pay, or feel confident about themselves at work.

"It all begins in school – the bullying and name-calling. At that age, children may not fully realise the emotional damage, but as they grow older, the impact starts to show. Many begin to question their self-worth, and without proper psychological support, this can eventually evolve into post-traumatic stress disorder," said Rakibul Hasan Sourav, a consultant psychologist (BS, MS in Psychology, Dhaka University).

Being bullied, or witnessing others being bullied, is not something that victims simply get over with time. It leaves a lasting wound and can significantly affect a person's life. There are countless stories of people who struggle with social anxiety, body image issues, and a lack of confidence, all because of the bullying they experienced early on in their lives.

Tackling bullying must start in schools. A zero-tolerance policy and student counselling are essential for every school. Teachers, parents, and peers must work together where kindness, respect, and inclusivity are encouraged and expected. Highlighting the need for early intervention, Rakibul stated, "Schools must take preventive action through awareness campaigns by highlighting the long-term consequences of bullying before it leaves lasting scars."

Additionally, it is vital to equip children with the tools to recognise, report, and effectively combat bullying, as reactive measures are more important than proactive ones. Beyond what schools and organisations do, society needs to confront the normalisation of bullying and the silence around it. We can only break the cycle of harm by listening to the victims, sharing their stories, and acknowledging their feelings. Every conversation, act of kindness, and effort to help create an environment where no child feels weak or alone.

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**Names have been changed upon request*

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ILLUSTRATION:
RAKEEB RAZZAQ

Is the NCTB curriculum too rigid with subject choices?

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

Ever since I was little, I enjoyed flipping through my elder brother's textbooks, completely ignoring my own that demanded immediate attention. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) textbooks seemed much more interesting when they weren't my own, which was how I discovered Agriculture Studies, Economics, and Finance.

I had made up my mind to study these as my electives when I was older, but things didn't end up working out that way, as my institution, which is a well-known all-girls' school, didn't offer agriculture at all, and I had decided to study in the Science group.

I had no qualms about studying any particular subject in the Science stream, although I was never particularly keen on Physics. That being said, I often lamented the fact that I was bound to study general subjects like Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or Bangladesh and Global Studies (BGS), which, in my opinion, had a rather unfocused syllabus, instead of Economics or Civics.

Given the choice, however, I would have liked to adopt a more diverse mix of subjects, which is a flexibility allowed in the international curriculum. O level and A level students are allowed to choose an assortment of subjects of their choice, and determine a number after a required minimum.

This "pure science" or "pure business" segregation often leads to people looking down on students who choose Humanities or Business Studies as "less capable", automatically assuming that Science subjects are more prestigious.

Of course, this approach may clash with the way the admission exams are set up for the Science groups. For Engineering exams, it's required for Bangla Medium students to have Higher Mathematics as a compulsory subject and either Statistics or Biology as an optional. For A levels, a student must have a minimum required grade in Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics. For Medical exams, it's mandatory to have taken Biology. Most other admission exams do not have such stringent requirements, so students with mixed backgrounds generally face no problems sitting for them.

Given that many students do not have a prospective career or higher studies stream in mind from secondary school, it makes sense for certain subjects to be mandatory. However, a completely "pure science" or "pure business" subject stream is not the only way to go, as someone with a Humanities or Business Studies focus may also wish to study subjects like Higher Mathematics, Biology, or Physics, and vice versa.

This can be implemented with minimal changes to the admissions system requirements. Not to mention, allowing a mix of subjects may also help students realise what they truly want to study, instead of feeling trapped within a select few options. I've seen a lot of my peers sign up for a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) degree without any particular knack for the subject itself, simply due to the fact that it felt like a waste of four years of effort to switch to a non-STEM major after studying in the Science division.

This "pure science" or "pure business" segregation often leads to people looking down on students who choose Humanities or Business Studies as "less capable", automatically assuming that Science subjects are more prestigious.

There may be some logistical obstructions in implementing this, considering the availability of teachers and the distribution of students. That being said, the curriculum should be set up in a way conducive to the betterment of students at the cost of some difficulty on the institution's part. Instead of overwhelming students with a bunch of subjects with multiple papers, the curriculum should be geared towards helping students figure out what they want to study and pursue.

While it makes sense for a wide assortment of subjects to be mandatory, students in secondary and higher secondary should be allowed some breathing room. That way, the curriculum can actually help them explore their own subjects of interest instead of confining them to STEM or non-STEM boxes.

The mirror between us

TINATH ZAEBA

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

The Oldest has always walked ahead, her shadow stretching long across the ground. She is the first, always the first. The first to test the ice in winter, daring the thin crust of frost to hold her weight. The first to trip on it, knees breaking through with a sharp crack, before scrambling up with laughter stitched into her breath. Behind her, the Youngest stands at the edge, watching, shivering not from the cold but from the fear that the cracks that caught one sister might one day catch the other too.

That is how it has always been. The Oldest faces the world first. She bends beneath the weight of expectations, learning early that every step will be measured. The Youngest follows, inheriting a story already half-written, a path already marked with footprints.

When the Oldest laughs, the Youngest learns to echo it, hoping the joy might be borrowed. When the Oldest falters, the Youngest carries the memory of her stumble, fearing the same ground will give way. The Oldest lives by the Youngest — not just in the shared tilt of their faces or the echo of their voices, but in the choices the Youngest makes before knowing she is making them.

There is comfort in that closeness. And there is terror.

The Oldest wears expectations like armour. She is the experiment, the one who learns where the walls stand and how much space is safe to claim. She discovers silence early, swallowing words before they can spill into the air. She becomes the example, the rule, the first test. Her story glimmers with brilliance, but it is lined with rooms where the air feels too thin.

The Youngest inherits both light and shadow. She runs faster because the Oldest clears the way, but she hesitates too, remembering where the ground once cracked. Every triumph is doubled — hers, and also the Oldest's. Every fear feels like a hand-me-down, worn even before she tries it on.

At the dinner table, this inheritance is plain. The Oldest sits with her fork neatly in place, fielding questions about grades, plans, and futures. The weight of expectation lands on her plate before the Youngest has even lifted hers. The Oldest answers carefully, carrying the family's demands like a shield. The Youngest remains quiet, yet the lesson is written into her: if the Oldest bears it, so will she.

But one evening, the Oldest sets her fork down and refuses to shrink. Her voice trembles but does not break. She says no — softly, firmly, against the grain of silence. Across the table, the Youngest freezes, learning. In that moment, defiance passes like a gift from one sister to the other. Years later, when the Youngest finds her own voice, she will realise it was borrowed from that night.

The mirror between them cuts both ways. The Youngest wants to be like the Oldest, but wonders if every stumble must be repeated, if dimming oneself is an inheritance too. Yet to want to be nothing like the Oldest feels like its own kind of loss. Who is the Youngest, if not also her reflection?

And for the Oldest, the mirror wounds as well. She hopes the Youngest will run where she slowed, speak where she was silent, shine where she was dimmed. But pride is edged with ache. In the Youngest's face, she sees the proof of what might have been, had the world been kinder. The Youngest becomes her dream and her wound all at once.

It is a strange inheritance between sisters, this weaving of pain and resilience. Trauma does not always roar; sometimes it hums beneath the surface. The Youngest hesitates because the Oldest once did. The Oldest aches when the Youngest refuses to shrink, because it reminds her of all the shrinking she had to endure. Yet strength passes between them too. Every burden the Oldest carried steadies the Youngest. Every risk the Oldest took cracked open a door for the Youngest to step through.

The shadow, the silence, the laughter, they pass back and forth, shifting shape but never disappearing.

Perhaps the art is not in fleeing the mirror, but in standing within it. To see not only the cracks but the way light refracts through them. To hold both ache and hope without letting either define the whole.

Sisters are never free of each other. They are mirrors — fractured and luminous, distorted yet unbreakable. Not identical, not interchangeable, but bound in ways that wound and heal at once. When the Youngest looks at the Oldest, she sees not only who she is, but everything they both might be. And when the Oldest looks at the Youngest, she sees not only loss, but proof, that her path was never wasted, that every shadow became shelter, that every risk became courage for them both.

They are, in the end, two stories braided together. One steps first, the other follows. But neither walks alone.

Tinath Zaeba is an optimistic daydreamer, a cat mom of 5 and a student of Economics at North South University. Get in touch via tinathzaeba25@gmail.com

Of September

AZRA HUMAYRA

With a glance, I see a
visage, well-known and
dear,
He stands, a portal to days
gone by, like the pane
Through which the mango's
bough in youthful cheer
Whispered tales of
innocence, sweet yet vain.
But now my gaze rests
upon the parchment's field,
Where rustling pages echo
leaves once sealed,
Falling softly, as if to reclaim
the past
In this solemn chamber,
where memories last.
I gaze upon him, yet know
not his fame,
As though my very birth
was tied to his name.
He departs,
My soul in anguish, till I
find him nigh,
Like the mango tree
that waits beneath my
window's sky.
In whispers soft, I speak to
him, where I dared not to
the mango tree,
I love him as the wind
caresses branches where
the mango blooms free,
He lingers by my side
through hours,
A warmth enduring, like
sunlit hours after the leaves
have ceased to be.

Azra Humayra is a sub-editor at Rising Stars.

ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

FARIHA LAMISA

Despite the popular misconception that teaching is an easy profession, the reality could not be further from the truth. A teaching job requires an enormous amount of patience. Often, teachers need to set aside their own emotions to cater to students' needs in the classroom. The task of teaching becomes more daunting when students are at a tender age. Apart from that, the profession seldom finds reciprocation in monetary terms in our country.

Needless to say, the mental health of school teachers remains one of the most pressing yet less discussed issues in our society.

Afsana Zesmin Mitu, a Mathematics teacher at Glenrich International School, feels that her mental health is being affected by the pressure of balancing both academic and administrative tasks. She says, "I feel emotionally exhausted by my academic goals. Besides, juggling administrative work and classroom management only worsens my condition."

Sadly, this is a common reality in Bangladesh. Studies conducted on both government and non-government school teachers have found that they face intense emotional and psychological burnout. Expanding on this, Afsana Zesmin Mitu adds, "In our profession, we get very limited time between lesson planning, grading, and meetings. Most of us do not get adequate time to recharge ourselves, which deteriorates our mental health. Apart from that, the payment structure does not always match the emotional investment this profession demands. That might also be a source of stress for many within our community."

Regarding time constraints in school teachers' lives, Mim Das, an English teacher at Imperial International School Narayanganj, points out that teachers are often required to do extra work beyond their job description. In addition, there is a constant demand for perfection, which takes a toll on their mental health. She elaborates, "In school teaching, sometimes there is work even after school hours, which hampers my personal time and affects my mental health. Moreover, perfection is given so much priority in English medium schools that even a small mistake creates a lot of pressure and mental stress."

Apart from time constraints and the constant juggling of job-related tasks, students' classroom behaviour can also be a source of stress for teachers. Animesh Kumar Saha, a Biology teacher at St. Joseph Higher Secondary College, feels demotivated by his students' preference for social media over classroom activities. "Since the post-Covid period, I have been noticing a sharp decline in my students' participation in classroom activities. As a teacher, this is not the easiest thing to witness. It makes me feel demotivated," he points out.

Additionally, he feels that teachers need to face intense scrutiny from the administration and parents, which makes him apprehensive. He explains, "Sometimes I find myself constantly wondering whether my words are being misconstrued in class. If anything, untoward happens, I end up carrying the emotional burden at home with me."

Demotivation in the job seems to be a consistent problem among National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) teachers, and it becomes more acute when they have to teach students from underprivileged backgrounds. Mahia Hasan*, an English teacher at a government school in Dhaka, works with students from economically marginalised backgrounds who are already far behind their grade level.

She explicates, "In the classroom, I am often aware that some of my students do not comprehend the lessons I deliver because of their knowledge gaps. I know for certain that some of them cannot even write their names in English. Yet, instead of addressing this, I am required to teach them grammar. It is mentally exhausting. Still, this is not representative of the entire class. I have also encountered students who are quite hard-working. However, my inability to support the students who are lagging behind is the most stressful part of my job."

In spite of all this job-related stress, there is seldom any institutional support system for teachers. As Mim Das explains, "No, admins are not concerned about teachers' mental health. Rather, teachers' mental health problems are often seen as a weakness. Most of the time, teachers suffer in silence from anxiety, stress, and burnout. Schools are mainly concerned with students' improvement and place less emphasis on teachers' development and training."

Talking about the same issue, Shaikh Kamal Hossain, a Mathematics instructor at Glenrich International School, observes that in the teaching sector, teachers are encouraged to carry the weight of stress by themselves instead of seeking support. He states, "There is a normalisation of tending to one's mental burdens by oneself in the teaching sector. Often, teachers feel discouraged from attending counselling or therapy sessions because of some negative notions surrounding it. Sometimes when a teacher seeks counselling or therapy, it leads to gossip related to their social life and character."

Sumaya Afrin Misti, a school psychologist and a co-founder of BloomAid an online mental health services thinks that in Bangladeshi school culture, in spite of growing awareness of students' psychological well-being, teachers' mental health struggles still remain an issue of the periphery.

Drawing from her observation, she says, "Despite growing awareness of student mental health in Bangladesh, the emotional well-being of teachers remains critically overlooked. As a school psychologist, I've witnessed firsthand how educators face mounting stress, often without the institutional support they need to cope. While initiatives such as the integration of a 'Wellbeing' subject into the national curriculum and teacher training on student emotional support mark important progress, these efforts have yet to extend meaningfully to the educators themselves."

To mitigate this crisis, Sumaya Afrin Misti suggests that schools need to be more proactive in terms of dealing with teachers' mental health. She explains, "Schools must prioritise teacher mental health as a vital occupational concern. Providing confidential counselling, peer-support groups, and workload monitoring can be pertinent to prevent burnout of teachers while promoting resilience. Integrated training on self-care, combined with student-focused programmes, can equip educators with practical strategies."

The mental health of teachers is not a personal issue but rather a systemic one that demands urgent attention from all sections of society. Unless we begin to care for our educators' mental health with the same urgency as we care for students' academic results, our education system will continue to falter because teachers cannot deliver their best in the classroom. Supporting teachers can no longer be optional; it is an essential necessity for a healthy classroom.

**Name has been changed upon request*

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