REFLECTIONS

The problem with the ranking system in our schools



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Some of us may have that one classmate who studies the hardest, attends every class, takes notes, doesn't go to hangouts because of studying, and takes every test so seriously as if it determines their future for the rest of their life. And ironically, when the results are revealed, they are not in the top percentile of the class. They did well but not good enough. They are stuck in the middle range, never recognised among the toppers, even though they consistently put in the effort.

For the whole of my student life, I was that student.

Our educational institutions glorify this particular marks-centric ranking system. The top students are adored by the teachers and respected by the students, while students who have the grit but never seem to score as high are stuck in a kind of limbo with reduced confidence, believing that whatever they do, they can never be that good, so many stop trying because trying feels futile. The "not good enough" students, like I was, dream of being among the top. In our school, the "Top 10" was regarded as the elite, awarded every year at the annual sports day with a badge of honour.

I imagined myself on that stage more times than I would like to admit. School ended, then college ended, and the badge never came, in all those years of trying.

What stays with me is not the disappointment. It is a question I only started asking much later: what was that badge actually measuring? Not effort, not consistency, nor the discipline of opening the same book for the 100th time. It measured a single number, achieved by a small handful of people, and it quietly told the rest of us that our version of hard work did not count for much. It measured the result, not the cost of achieving it.

The concern is the culture that the ranking system creates. I have watched multiple peers try just as diligently as I did, term after term, only to stop trying completely at some point. Some of them slipped into depression. And through all of it, the one thing that rarely got acknowledged was the effort. Parents cared about only one thing: the result. Not how many hours were put in, not how many nights were lost to revision, just the number that came back on the result sheet.

Ranking systems like this exist almost everywhere, and increasingly, the people who study education are asking the same question I eventually did. Alfie Kohn, one of the prominent critics of grade-based competition, has argued that tiny grade point average (GPA) differences that separate top-ranked students from everyone are usually statistically meaningless, so singling out students manufactures a hierarchy. It creates an obsession with grades. His research points to something a lot of "not good enough" students learn the hard way: ranking systems push students toward easier tasks and turn classmates into rivals because the whole structure rewards getting better scores than the person you're sitting with in the class.

The clearest example, though, is Finland. There are no ranking systems in place like the schools in Bangladesh. This means students do not feel pressure to compete with each other, and the fear of failing is replaced by a genuine desire to learn. Their pedagogical philosophy is that cooperation, not competition, is what actually produces success in learning.

In stark contrast, in Bangladesh, it is as if the identity of the students is built around this ranking system. In many schools, a student's roll number is set by their previous yearly result. It is essentially a number branded onto a student's forehead for everyone to either glorify or laugh at. Relatives ask your roll number and think they know how "good" of a son or daughter you are. Teachers ask and decide how they will treat you. Classmates ask and decide whether you will be part of the group or not. The worst part is that it all starts from the very first day you step into school.

I do not know if our schools will ever stop branding students with a number.

But from experience, I know what I would tell the version of myself who spent years imagining wearing that badge: you never needed a badge to define you; it was the school system that needed one. Maybe the answer is not teaching students how to earn that badge. Maybe it is asking why we needed one in the first place.

References

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2. TechClass. (2025, November 22). *Why Finland's Schools Have No Honor Roll or Student Rankings.*

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