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## When examinations hurt children



PHOTO: STAR

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Newspaper headlines and photos on January 1 displayed jubilant children with new textbooks distributed to schools around the country as a new year's gift. The previous day's media display was also upbeat featuring fortunate students who secured the

coveted GPA-5 score in the Primary Completion Examination (PECE) and Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) Examination.

A New Year's Day radio broadcast of BBC Bangla reported that at least three children committed suicide because they did not achieve the expected results in exams. A 14-year old girl in Barishal hanged herself when she learned that she did not secure GPA-5 in her JSC exam. Another adolescent girl from Goshaighat in Shariatpur took her own life because she failed in the JSC exam. A boy at Kamlakanda in Netrokona did the same when he failed in the annual class six exam.

These are devastating tragedies for the children, their loved ones, and for society. Less dramatic but damaging on a large scale is the fact that the vast majority of children taking the PECE and JSC exams, who do not score GPA-5 (87 percent and 97 percent respectively) are actually branded as failures or semi-failures and less than competent.

It should not be hard to guess the effect on self-esteem and self-confidence of the children for being placed under high competitive pressure and labelled as incompetent.

BBC Bangla quoted clinical psychologist Ishrat Sharmeen: "Adolescent boys and girls are highly emotional and sensitive and can resort to extreme steps if placed under high social and emotional pressure." Sharmeen went on, "They may also indulge in copy-cat action when they hear of what other children did."

Muhibul Hasan Chowdhury, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education observed, "Most countries conduct assessment of student learning, but the grading of students has made it highly competitive." He said, "We want to bring about change in assessment so that real competencies for life rather than rote learning can be measured."

Asked about the effects of the PECE examination, Zakir Hossain, the Minister of State for Primary and Mass Education said, "There is no thought at present of cancelling any exam, but we are considering reforms in it."

How have the primary school and lower secondary exams turned into a source of anxiety and stress for children, parents and arguably school authorities and teachers?

And why are the decision makers in the education sector so hesitant to retrace their steps?

The question has been raised persistently by education researchers, child development experts, and parents ever since the nationwide public examination at the end of class 5 was introduced in 2010. Since then, highly competitive, high-stake, national, centrally administered public examinations at the end of grades 5 and 8 were added to the already existing SSC and HSC exams at the end of grade 10 and 12.

The counter-productive and perverse consequences of too many public exams have been well documented. A surge of private coaching centres, commercial guidebooks, rote memorisation, desperation for guessing questions, cheating in exams, question leaks, incentive for authorities to show high pass rates and so on have been identified. (Education Watch Report 2014, Whither Grade 5 Examination, CAMPE.) And now arises the tragedy of young lives being lost.

As I have written earlier, “It is not that all exams and student assessment should be ditched. The value of traditional school-based annual exams needs to be restored. Public assessment at key stages should be for assessing basic competencies in language, math and science rather than using these as a substitute for the class-room based evaluation and annual school-based exams. Schools, teachers, parents and the education authorities need to prioritise teaching and learning, rather than preparing for and taking public exams” (The Daily Star, “High stake exams for children,” December 2, 2019.)

The education authorities need to address the dire consequences of the public exams for adolescent children urgently and bring about necessary changes without further delay.

Decision needs to be taken to replace PECE and JSC this year (2020) by a simple Foundational Competency Assessment test at the end of classes 5 and 8. These would comprise tests for Bangla and Mathematics competencies for class 5 students and Bangla, Mathematics, English and Science for class 8 students. The test content would be based on essential curricular competencies at these stages assessed respectively with two 1.5-hour tests for class 5 and 4, and two-hour tests for class 8. The key feature

of these would be test items reflecting basic skills and competencies and not the specific contents of the various textbooks for different subjects.

Students would receive competency scores without GPA categories and no one would be declared a failure. The results would be used to assess performance of schools and the system as well as to identify the need for further remedial support for students, teachers and schools. An adaptation of the National Student Assessment currently conducted on a nationwide sampling every two years can be the model for primary and junior secondary competency assessment design and marking.

School-based annual half-yearly and annual exams would continue and be based on subjects and text book content for grade four onward (with no formal exam up to class 3). A student's performance would be judged by a combination of school score and the competency test score with equal weight to each. The combined score may be used for admission to the lower secondary and higher secondary levels.

The measures proposed need to be considered urgently because the consequences of not doing so are grave for children and the education system. With dedicated effort, due attention to the technical aspects of student assessment, dialogue with stakeholders including teachers and parents, and decisive policy steps, the change is implementable within the year.

A basic premise of the move is to eliminate the high-stake character of the current arrangements. This means that no one needs to be concerned about being affected adversely by the reform. This message has to be conveyed clearly to all. And implementation of the competency-based assessment has to be carried out competently.

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