SUSPENDING TEACHING DURING EXAMS

Self-sabotaging education?

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LAST week, I was speaking online with some Bangladeshi students from Brisbane, Australia. I asked one of them, a sixth grader, whether she had gone to school that day. She said she had not, because classes at her school were suspended. The reason: the Secondary School Certificate Examinations, which are now under way. The annual examinations usually run for about a month. During this time, classes are suspended for all students at the schools hosting the examinations. With some exceptions, this is what happens in schools across the country outside the major cities.

This practice has existed for decades. When I was a student in a sub-district school in northern Bangladesh in the late 1980s, we also enjoyed this ‘bonus’ month-long break. It seems to have become an unquestioned norm. I rarely see anyone challenge it or propose alternatives.

Why did this practice begin? One likely reason is infrastructure. Schools hosting the exams must allocate their classrooms for exams use, leaving little or no space for regular teaching.

Another reason, perhaps more significant is exams security. The security connection dates back to colonial times and we have kept it largely unchanged. Schools hosting the SSC or the HSC exams are treated as special security zones. The public is barred from entering the site. Only examinees, invigilators and officials are allowed inside. Government officials, including magistrates, visit the centres to ensure security and prevent cheating or other misconduct.

While concerns about infrastructure and security are real, I still struggle to see how they justify halting learning for students for such a long period. In fact, I see this as a form of self-sabotage in our education system. Bangladesh has several such practices that undermine teaching, learning and students' future.

Bangladesh is, perhaps, one of the few education systems in the world with extremely low contact hours. Consider the sheer number of public holidays, some of which apply only to schools, not to other institutions. Teacher shortage and absenteeism are common, especially outside major cities. Schools and teachers are also required to produce various types of data for authorities, which eats into teaching time. And, whenever a school hosts an event, a minister's visit or a bureaucrat's inspection, teaching is usually the first casualty. I have also heard that occasionally schools in urban settings cancel classes to accommodate competitive exams such as those arranged by the Public Service Commission.

We all know that teaching does not automatically equal learning. But that does not diminish the value of teaching. Students may not learn everything a teacher teaches, but they will learn something. Without teaching, there are no input, no opportunity and no engagement. There is no denying that students are increasingly skipping school and relying on private tutors and coaching centres, especially those from more privileged backgrounds. However, students from less advantaged families depend heavily on schools and teachers. When teaching stops, their learning opportunities shrink. Reducing teaching time only deepens their learning poverty.

My PhD research in a rural sub-district in northern Bangladesh highlighted the importance of school for children from poor households. For them, school was a refuge, a place away from the hardships of home, where there were limited learning resources or incentives. At school, they had access to teachers, peers and educational resources that kept them connected to learning and to their dreamed futures. For more privileged students, school mattered far less; they had better alternatives outside.

Any loss of teaching time is harmful to our education system, our students and our society. It does not matter who authorises it or why. Less teaching is linked to poorer learning outcomes. We often complain that students study English for 12 years, from Grade 1 to Grade 12, yet, they leave school with limited functional ability. Officially, yes, it is 12 years. But, if we calculate the actual contact hours, the outcome becomes far less surprising. Teaching quality is a valid concern, but that concern only exists when teaching is happening in the first place.

I remember that when I was in Grade 12 at a prestigious college, we had fewer than 20 English lessons in the entire year. How can students learn when teaching time is so limited and opportunities for academic engagement are so scarce?

Some may argue that public examinations like the SSC are a priority and, therefore, teaching can be suspended to accommodate them. I would disagree. Exams are not more important than teaching. What we need is a way to accommodate both without sacrificing either.

In Australia, students in Grade 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit for an annual test called NAPLAN, the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy. The test runs for a week, but classes for all other grades continue as usual. They are never suspended because of the test.

At the university where I work, exams are sometimes held at the weekends or after hours because scheduling them during the week can be difficult.

Bangladesh needs more sustainable ways to organise public examinations without disrupting teaching for other students. One practical approach is to hold exams in every school for their own SSC candidates. Classrooms can be allocated in one section of the school for exams use. This is practised only in a small number of schools at present. Some rural schools may lack sufficient classrooms; these should be identified and prioritised for expansion. This would be a long-term investment in education that ensures teaching does not have to be sacrificed for the sake of examination.

This approach would require rethinking our long-standing views on exams security. Examinations are routine educational activities. They should be treated as such, not as events requiring extraordinary security measures. Schools and teachers should be responsible for administering exams, with support

from authorities. As a society, we need to move away from treating exams as high-security operations. Fear, restriction, and excessive control should not define our approach to assessment that is an integral part of our education and society.

Suspending teaching for examinations, or for any other reason, is unwise, unacceptable, and unsustainable. As I have argued, it is a form of self-sabotage. This harmful practice must end. We need practical solutions that allow teaching and learning to continue uninterrupted, even while exams are held in the same school.

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