



## Young Teenage Suicides in Bangladesh—Are Mandatory Junior School Certificate Exams to Blame?

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In Bangladesh, secondary level education consists of seven years of formal schooling. The first 3 years are referred to as junior secondary (grades VI–VIII), the next 2 years are secondary (grades IX–X), while the final 2 years are higher secondary (grades XI–XII) (Hossain 2016). At the end of elementary education (at grade V), there is a public examination called the Primary School Certificate (PSC), followed by the Junior School Certificate (JSC) at grade VIII, the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) at Grade X, and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) before entering university at grade XII. Before the PSC and JSC exams were introduced, there was no mandatory examination before SSC in Bangladesh, although a few students took the Junior Scholarship (at grade VIII) in an attempt to getting scholarship funding from the government (Hossain 2016; Daily Star 2010). The JSC was introduced in 2010 with 1.5 million examinees. This comprises a common question paper for students of all eight educational boards in the country and another separate paper for the Madrasa board (Daily Star 2010). The final JSC exam is held at the end of year, but three termly exams and a model test (and additional weekly and monthly tests in some schools) are taken in preparation for this exam for the students (Hossain 2016).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2019), one in nine individuals who live in areas affected by conflict have a moderate or severe mental disorder. This rate is one in five for the children and adolescents. Half of these mental disorders begin by the age of 14 years (WHO 2019). Therefore, the age at which the JSC exam is taken (i.e., 13 to 15 years) is taken at a time when adolescents are arguably vulnerable to the onset of mental disorders due to the heightened emotional reactions (Kessler et al. 2007). The additional academic stress and pressure of getting a good grade point average (GPA) can exacerbate mental health problems during this adolescent transition period. Contemporary adolescents in Bangladesh are also pressured by their parents to get a high GPA because it is regarded as prestigious. This

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competitive environment can result in students experiencing insurmountable pressure and academic distress (India Today 2016), and which has been reported to be the most salient risk factor of adolescent mental suffering, as well as suicide (Arafat and Mamun 2019; Jahan et al. 2020; Mamun and Griffiths 2020a, b; Mamun et al. 2020a, b).

The introduction of the JSC examination has led to many reports in the Bangladeshi press concerning the negative effect it has on young adolescents' mental health and well-being. For instance, a *Google* search by the authors with the keywords "JSC exam suicide" (covering the years 2017–2019) resulted in over around 360 Bangla press reports (note—the country has no official suicide surveillance or database system; therefore, suicide press reports were utilized in this study alike previous studies [e.g., Mamun et al. 2020a, b]). There were at least 39 suicides of children aged between 13 and 16 years (6 males and 33 females) relating to issues concerning the JSC exam and/or students not happy with their GPA (17 suicides in 2019, six suicides in 2018, and 16 suicides in 2017). There were two other cases of suicide due to general academic distress, but these were not due specifically to the JSC or GPA not being perceived as good enough (not listed in Table 1). Of the 39 identified cases, 34 committed suicide by hanging, four by poisoning, and one jumped in front of a train.

Moreover, based on a recent Bangladeshi retrospective study among medical students (i.e., first year to internship comprising a total six-year cohort), a total of 13 suicide cases were reported within a 23-month period (Mamun et al. 2020a). This suggests the JSC and pressure to get a high GPA may be responsible for a higher suicide incidence than other education cohorts in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the number of suicides found via press reports is likely to be lower than the actual number of suicides because not all suicides will have been reported because many families prefer not to admit suicide because (i) suicide is a criminal offense, (ii) it is contrary to religious beliefs, (iii) suicide is contrary to cultural practices, (iv) suicide is upsetting to family members, (iv) families would prefer to avoid post-mortem complexities (e.g., involving the police, delayed burial), and (v) families would prefer to view the deaths as accidental rather than as suicide (Arafat 2019; Mamun and Griffiths 2020a, b; Mamun et al. 2020b).

Based on the data we collected, it is evident that students are not just committing suicide because they fail in the JSC but also because they are not getting the maximum GPA (i.e., 5 out of 5). Given that there were 2.61 million JSC examinees in 2019, this is a sizeable "at-risk" group that could experience mental health and stress issues, and in extreme cases, suicide. However, the Bangladeshi government has paid little attention to reducing exam pressure during early adolescence, even though Bangladeshi educationalists have demanded an end to competitive PSC and JSC exams (BD News 2019). Based on the findings here, Bangladeshi government officials responsible for education policy should strategically address poor mental well being caused by exam stress and the need for high GPA scores in early adolescence. Such strategies could include (i) limiting the number of students per class to no more than 40 students to provide better educational support, (ii) decreasing the amount of homework, (iii) emphasizing the cultivation of applied skills rather than traditional rote learning and repetitive task methods, (iv) employing greater use of applied exam questions rather than ones purely reliant on memory and rote learning, (v) abolishing the ranking exam results and using a simple "pass/fail" metric instead, (vi) delaying competitive exams until grade X, and (vii) utilizing professional practitioners within schools (e.g., psychologists) to help build up resilience skills to deal with exam failure and not getting the desired GPA (BD News 2019; India Today 2016; The Star 2018).

**Table 1** Distribution of Bangladeshi Junior School Certificate examinees' suicide cases

City	Age	Gender	Method	Reason for committing suicide	Media source of story
<b>Suicides in 2019</b>					
Magura	13	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	Ittefaq
Magura	14	Female	Poisoning	Did not get GPA5	Ittefaq
Pabna	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	RTV
Bangla	16	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Bangla Tribune
Dhaka	15	Female	Hanging	Physical illness was reported, and committed suicide during the JSC exam	RTV
Barisal	14	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	RTV
Shariatpur	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	RTV
Dinajpur	14	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	RTV
Dinajpur	16	Male	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam (three times)	Sandhani TV
Rajbari	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	RTV
Chandpur	13	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Chandpur News
Chandpur	14	Female	Hanging	Quarreled with mother at the end of the JSC exam	Chandpur Times
Nilphamari	14	Female	Hanging	Harassment by another boy, but committed suicide during the JSC exam	Janakantha
Barisal	Not reported	Male	Hanging	Reason not reported but committed suicide during the JSC exam	Jugantor
Rajbari	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Sandhani TV
Dhaka	14	Male	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Janakantha
Dhaka	14	Female	Hanging	Reason not reported, but committed suicide during the JSC exam	Sara Bangla
<b>Suicides in 2018</b>					
Lalmonirhat	14	Female	Hanging	Relationship problems with his family, but committed suicide during the JSC exam	Gram Bangla News
Jhenaidah	14	Female	Poisoning	Rebuked by family due to their study, and committed suicide before the JSC exam	Janakantha
Lalmonirhat	Not reported	Male	Jumped in front of train	Failed the JSC exam (twice)	News24
Pataakhali	14	Female	Hanging	Rebuked by family due to their study, and committed suicide before the JSC exam	Kalapara New 24
Dhaka	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Naya Diganta
Kishoreganj	13	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	Times of BD
<b>Suicides in 2017</b>					
Chandpur	15	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Chandpur	15	Female	Poisoning	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Rajshahi	14	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	Famous News
Pataakhali	14	Female	Hanging	Did not get GPA5	Famous News
Lakshimpur	Not reported	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Madaripur	12	Male	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Khagrachari	13	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News

Table 1 (continued)

City	Age	Gender	Method	Reason for committing suicide	Media source of story
Narayanganj	14	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Satkhira	Not reported	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Famous News
Netrokona	13	Female	Hanging	Told a family member she had an exam phobia, and committed suicide during the JSC exam	BD News Hour 24
Brahmanbaria	13	Female	Hanging	Failed the JSC exam	Dhaka Press
Sitakund	Not reported	Male	Poisoning	Rebuked by family due to study, and committed suicide during JSC exam	BD Live
Dinajpur	13	Female	Hanging	Rebuked by family due to study, and committed suicide before the JSC exam	Mukti Joddhar Kantha
Sylhet	Not reported	Female	Hanging	Reason not reported, committed suicide after JSC exam	Durjoy Bangla
Kushitia	Not reported	Female	Hanging	Rebuked by teacher due to study, and committed suicide before the JSC exam	Jugantor
Dhaka	Not reported	Female	Hanging	Reason not reported, committed suicide during the JSC exam	RTV

A full list of the news-report online sources is available on request from the first author (mamunphi46@gmail.com)

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they do not have any interests that could constitute a real, potential or apparent conflict of interest with respect to their involvement in the publication. The authors also declare that they do not have any financial or other relations (e.g., directorship, consultancy, or speaker fee) with companies, trade associations, unions, or groups (including civic associations and public interest groups) that may gain or lose financially from the results or conclusions in the study. Sources of funding are acknowledged.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of University's Research Ethics Board and with the 1975 Helsinki Declaration.

**Informed Consent** Not applicable to this study.

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