

The challenges of a school student from a middle class family for receiving quality education

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Introduction

(Written by Abyad Mabsur Rafid)

To what extent does society's prevailing socio-economic disparity contribute to students' reception of adequate, quality, and equitable education? Thanks to the dominant Capitalistic system, it seems like this is a prevalent reality in Bangladesh, evident in the recent dramatic rise of income distribution. Although projected to be an emerging global economy, Bangladesh is one of the representatives of uneven wealth distribution in Asia, with the top 5% taking over 95% of total income (Chowdhury & Hossain, 2016). We are, in effect, concerned with the consequences it has with regards to education. Hence, this study attempts to zero in on the dynamic underlying this issue, especially in the context of the education system in Bangladesh. The focus, however, centers around a string of stumbling blocks that students belonging from middle class families inevitably encounter in the rightful attainment of a full-fledged standard education. Taking into account that most surveys underscore the hindrances that students face with regards to only tertiary-level education, this paper takes an unconventional approach for analyzing the result based on qualitative and objective data-inputs, from students recounting their experiences from school or/and college.

In any case, this is an indispensable issue to address, keeping in mind that Bangladesh is currently undergoing what is known in the parlance of economy and sociology as the phase of 'demographic dividend' (Matin, 2012). It marks the transitioning phase of a country's economy, when the working-age population (typically 14-64 years of age) outnumbers the non-working sector, i.e., population below 14 and above 64 years of age (UNFPA, 2016). Expected to last for 20-30 years more in Bangladesh, this potential can be reaped to its maximum if the youth is prepared- both with quality education and hands-on skills- to thrive in the volatile job-market of the 21st century. In a country such as Bangladesh where the population predominantly belongs to

middle class families (about 40 million), it is crucial to address and tackle the impediments that young students from those families invariably run into. On top of that, this survey intends to understand if meritorious students from the middle-class get equal access and opportunity to a standard level of education, despite having equal meritorious ranking with respect to their counterparts from rich families.

We, however, indulge in the presumption that secondary and higher-secondary Bangladeshi students from middle class face a series of challenges and difficulties compared to their counterpart belonging from the upper socio-economic echelons- which is certainly not an infallible proposition, since it is contingent upon the findings that result from the survey.

Although there is no consensus among economists regarding a concrete income-range, (ADB, 2010) identifies anyone earning from \$2 to \$20 per day as belonging to the middle-class in Bangladesh. Hence, our classification is constructed bearing in mind that monthly incomes may generate either from both a working father and a mother in a family, from one of them, or, from neither. On top of that, there can be possible sources of additional income.

The specific amount of tuition fee is another variable which is also of significant consideration for averting exceptional cases from skewing the findings. Instances of low-earning families sending children to higher-costing elite schools and vice versa are more frequent than completely absent- yet exceptional, and therefore, are not accurately representative of the prevailing socio-economic scenario in Bangladesh. Besides, any impact of a specific curriculum or medium of instruction should only be conspicuously discernable if any striking trends are observed.

Generally speaking, we are interested in addressing the experiences of the respondent in their school or/and college life, with the aim of analyzing if schooling

standard is dependent on wealth. Besides, recognizing extracurricular activities as profoundly influential in the overall development of individuals, this study is an attempt to capture students' perceptions in regards to their institution's commitment to the same. As much as it is a requisite to pinpoint the quality and quantity of Extracurricular clubs operating in a given institution, it is imperative to understand the benefactor's perception as well. In the same breath, we aim to inquire about other indispensable yet basic facilities that are inextricably linked to a comprehensive student-centric experience. In the context of schools and colleges in Bangladesh, basic amenities in our research should include (but generally are not limited to) convenient transportation systems, temperature maintenance, sports compounds, necessary classroom requirements such as proper desks, boards, electricity, and so on.

Next, the study has in view, as one of its marked components, to determine whether the students had faced or are facing, in their perspectives, any educational difficulties due to financial constraints, and if so, how that has affected them down the line. Essentially, this section is to find out how distinctive, if at all, the personal difficulties noted by students hailing from disparate backgrounds are. The objective, here, is to examine what they conceive to be the extent to which institutional education has impacted their lives. That is to say, we are interested in deducing how important the schooling phase has been in terms of both higher education and career. If it has been made possible to infer whether the outcome was received with positive or negative light by students, we want to examine if they would prefer changing their institution and if so, the rationale behind that. Although we acknowledge there could be a panoply of reasons or motivations driving that decision, we are nonetheless inclined to construe if that drive, at least in part, is correlated to the possible case of institutions having a better approach to both ECA and academic instruction methods.

Lastly, we aim to pose a number of situational scenarios for pinpointing the specific considerations respondents would factor in. The decision(s) that the respondent

opts for is an indication of any underlying incentives or impetus. Essentially, the ambition here is to decipher whether and how they would perceive imaginable scenarios to be potentially of more significance in any way to their lives than their existing reality.

Literature review:

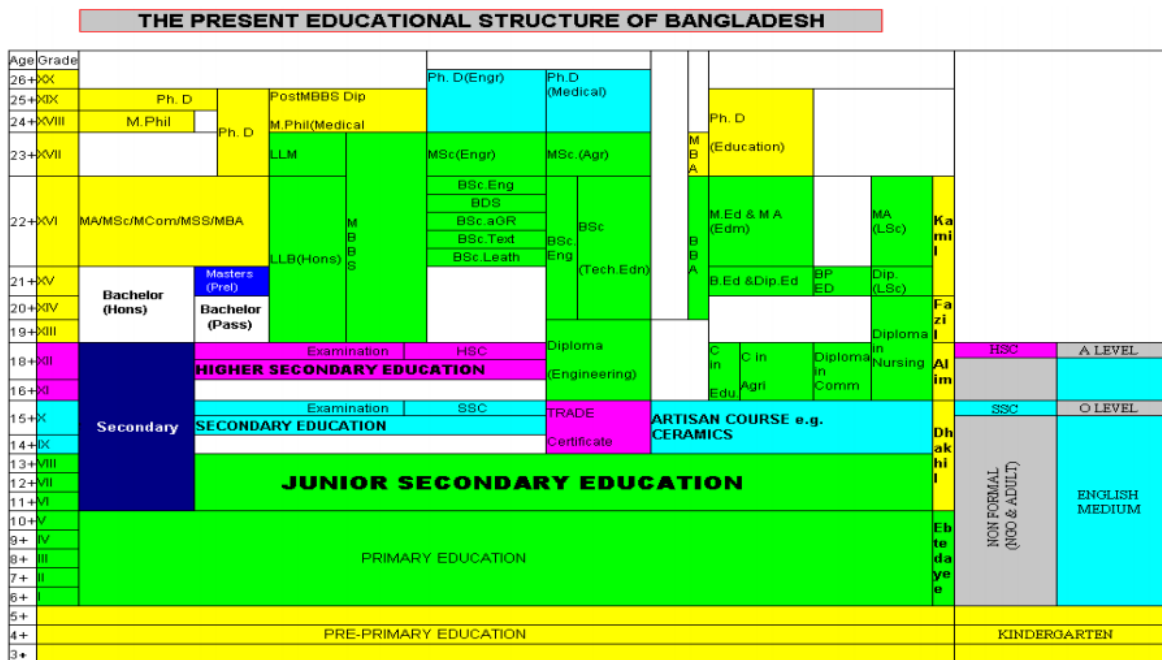
(Written by Abid Hossain)

This research falls under the broad term of “educational inequality.” Numerous studies have been conducted on this category both in and outside of Bangladesh, however the comparison of education between the classes is a new outlook and researches are yet to be carried out to fill the gap.

Findings of other studies

A study was done regarding low-income and its educational outcomes of children in Canada. Ferguson(2007) stated that the Ontario Child health research found out the association of low income in a family with several societal problems including children leading to academic issues, mainly due to the financial pressures and weights a family has to go through. Ferguson reaches a conclusion that a family that has low income in a predominantly capitalist society, it gets more difficult to manage the finances and hence the quality of education in children gets compromised (Gamoran & Adam, 2001). In a different research, Edgerton (2008) explains that this finding was quite of an oversimplification as income is not the sole determinant of a child’s education but rather the quality and accessibility of education also falls under the hands of institutions and perhaps the government itself; because if education is made “free for all” then the issue of income-status does not arise in the first place. There has been some progress in Bangladesh today about children’s education in comparison to the East Pakistan period. Education was privatised and literacy rate was as low as 21% in the years 1954-1958 (Asadullah, 2010). Bangladesh today mandates that all children should receive free primary education (WB, 2012). Despite education being so accessible, a survey of 150 students showed that around 40% of students dropped out of schools for the rote and shallow teaching standards (Cameron, 2012). Cameron (2012) found out

that the lessons were irrelevant with the children's lives and hours of teaching are very short in comparison with UK schools and have a very high student teacher ratio. A similar result was found by Banbeis(2010) who carried out the survey on 500 students of Dhaka and a 35% dropout rate was discovered. The quality of education in Bangladesh is far from being uniform- there is an apparent hierarchy between 13 types of schools and a lack of unified curricula continues to create disparity that affects people in all levels of Bangladeshi society(Prodhan, 2016). Studying in different systems will not only create divergent views of the world but it will further widen the financial gaps of people (Benbeis, 2008).



Source: Benbeis, 2008

There was further insight in the study of Cameron(2012) which found out that not only did the quality of education depend on facilities available but the stale and controversial methods like beating and harassing the students contributed to the high drop-out rate occurrences. This fact was further validated by a psychological study carried out in Uttar Pradesh, India which gathered evidence that the student's academic performance was impacted directly with the self-esteem and

perceptions of himself (Hoff & Pandey, 2004). Beating and any sort of act that violates self-esteem puts the student's life in danger.

The impact of low income in the quality of education has been observed in studies all over the world. The Ontario Child study, narrated by Edgerton(2008), found out that despite education being free, the higher incomes family children consistently outperformed the middle class children to a great extent and therefore family status has close associations with the quality of a child's education in Canada. There were other researches that completely went aligned with the findings of this Canadian research. For example, a United States research concluded that socioeconomic disadvantages have a direct negative correlation with success in the academic realm and had more importance than the attitudes towards the students (Brooks & Duncan, 2007). However, this finding was disputed by another large study conducted in the upcoming years which interviewed 10-16 year olds. This study reached a conclusion that most of the academic contribution had less to do with their family-income and more to do with the relationship and attitudes of their parents towards them (Rachel, 2010). Rachel(2010) observed that middle class children's academic performance boosted to its peak in schools and colleges because the parents from the middle class families generally prioritize and support education as an important necessity for their children. In Bangladesh however, there are more to the challenges of receiving quality education as throughout history natural calamities and diseases caused widespread disruption in education systems (Hasan, 2020). In the recent Covid-19 pandemic and in the 1971 war, there were mass auto-promotions and over-lenieny in checking exam papers which created academic loopholes (Halder, 2021). Floods cover a large portion of Bangladesh, especially the 1998 flood which took away 75% land area and more than 1000 deaths (Waldman, 2004). These problems violently disrupt the lives of the people and education becomes nothing but an unreachable dream for many of the citizens. Over the years, the number of floods are increasing and the melting glaciers of the Himalayas has been unanimously agreed by scientists to be the main cause behind this (Afrin, 2015). Apart from these factors, the education system of Bangladesh also has responsibilities to bridge the gap between different curricula. The Madrasa curriculum is designed to forcefully instil religious teachings to everyone, even those who want to specialize in a different field. Thus the primary objective is to

religiously motivate, unlike the other curricula (Prodhan, 2010). Due to this reason, the religious schools lack the scientific and technological outlook and opportunities.

Research gap

These studies have helped gain different perspectives to the research and further strengthened the purpose of conducting this research. There seems to be a conclusive agreement between a group of studies that low income of middle class families negatively affects the education quality. On the contrary other groups state that structural disparities in education widens the education-gap and therefore unifying the curricula improves teaching quality. Equally contradictory results of such groups have confused researchers and hence the need for more research has become necessary in order to dissolve the conflicting ideas and reach an agreement. Furthermore, very little research has been done to compare the children of middle-class and elite-class families and hence this research intends to bridge this literature gap.

Methodology:

(Written by Abid Hossain)

Setting and Participants

The preparation of this research and the formation of its initial stages started from April 15, 2021 during the months of Ramadan and ended on May 22 of the same year. Therefore the research took about *more than a month* to complete. This timeframe was sufficient enough for the researchers to complete all the necessary arrangements and preparations that constitute a research project despite the **limitations** of being in pandemic-lockdown. The arrangements and

preparations include- *finding and filtering research questions based on the title, looking at the literature review in detail with making the initial hypothesis, making arrangements for the data collection process, preparing the survey and publishing and finally analysing and discussing to reach a result for the research.* Perhaps the most challenging part was to plan and decide on the process of collecting the primary data through the audience. Despite the strict guidelines of the lockdown, the research did not get hampered in any way; the field work that would have taken place if there was no lockdown, has been replaced with **online surveys** via Google forms and the face-to-face questioning has been replaced with **social media chats** and hence the data collection stage was made very convenient by these means.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers worked from home- all of the work, including data collection, was solely done online and hence there was no need or benefit to have a place to conduct this research. The survey was up for two weeks for anyone to fill it up and by the end of two-weeks, around 50 people responded to it. Fairness is an important aspect of carrying out research and that is why the researchers distributed the form to **male** and **female** participants to equal numbers and size. The **age** group was also an aspect that was focused upon- as the experience of school-life may vary upon generations and therefore to make the target group consistent the form has only been delivered to students who are currently studying in school or have just completed school and are in their higher studies. Along with that, the survey took information only on the students and their school experiences and the teacher's experience was not included since it was not necessarily relevant with this topic and also biases may arise as teachers or higher authority may promote their workplace. The distribution was careful on the idea of the student's family status and **income**. Hence the researchers avoided giving forms to only a particular group of people of particular status but rather distributed to all categories of people and of families of all ranges of income. Children from a less privileged community school were just as much targeted from children going to an elite school. To make sure the children of middle class families and the children of high-income families have an equal chance of filling the survey, a short conversation was carried out with the student to understand this. Not only this, university students from public, private, national universities and school and college students from English medium,

Bangla medium and English version institutions were distributed questionnaires to equal portions and encouraged to fill it up. Some in-call interviews were taken as well to the people who went through financial crises and possible hard-ships in paying the tuition fees of schools so that such situations can be analysed and compared in the light of the responses that were received through online questionnaires. It is to be noted that online surveys will not be able to cover those families that have limited or no access to the Internet; therefore the form did not reach those people. This limitation will exist until lockdown opens.

Data Analysis

The collected data was **analysed** with respect to the type of data that it constitutes itself to be. Numerical and quantitative responses were automatically summarized into polls which made it convenient to make a conclusion out of it. Other types of questions like checkboxes, linear scale rating, ranking subjects and “yes” and “no” response questions were automatically summarized with the features of Google forms into pie-charts, bar-charts and other kinds of graphs. The open ended and opinion questions are very difficult to summarize in context of the research. The answers are generally unique and do not follow any pattern which makes it a **limitation**. However, it was possible for an one open ended question in the survey to “shrink” itself into yes and no answer. To test the **hypothesis** of this study- *middle class children confront greater challenges and less than satisfactory education*- a **theoretical framework** has been used which will firstly compare and identify between middle class children and elite class children. Secondly the framework will analyse all sorts of facilities, ECAs and privileges that the responder’s school provides. A school with excellent educational quality has been kept as a control version and means to compare it with the responses so that a conclusive “score” of the responder's school can be achieved. These scores will be averaged and compared between the middle and higher class of children and through this, the desired findings will arrive. *The communication between researchers was excellent hence there was no issue in the flow of collaboration*; a friendly and welcoming environment was shared where every member helped each other.

Ethical Considerations

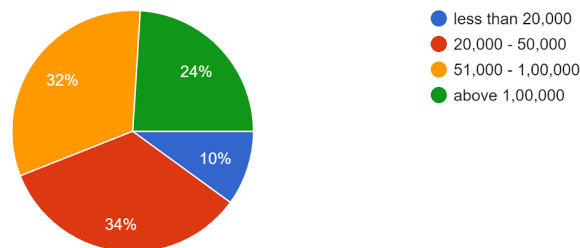
Finally, all the **safety and security** of the participants of this research was ensured with absolute certainty and the consent, confidentiality of the surveys were told to the participants right at the beginning of this research. Participants were ensured that no personal information (name, email, phone number), regardless whether it is sensitive or not, is present in the survey and it has nothing to do with the intention or purpose of this research. Any information collected is only for the research and will be removed all at once after the completion. Lastly, the survey was also **transparent** to the participants about the intention of collecting the data- basic information about their schools and experiences analyzed and tested in light of the research.

Findings

(Written by Fariha Tasneem)

The survey generated numerous quantitative data from the participants. The initial question divides the participants into 2 groups based on their average family income (in BDT) per month. Group 1 consisted of participants in: less than 20,000 and 20,000 - 50,000 options while the other two options lead to Group 2.

What is your average family income (in BDT) per month?
50 responses



Group 1 and Group 2 comparison

For the first question we found that participants from group 1 had an average school fee of BDT 3,100 while group 2 presented an average of BDT 7,600. Then we explored their school curriculum. The majority of both the groups were from Bangla Medium background.

What was your school curriculum?

22 responses

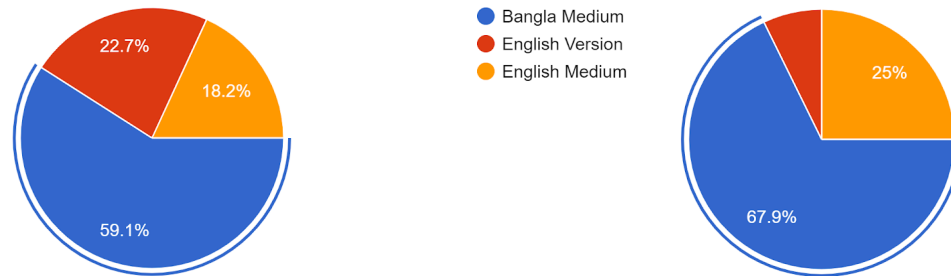
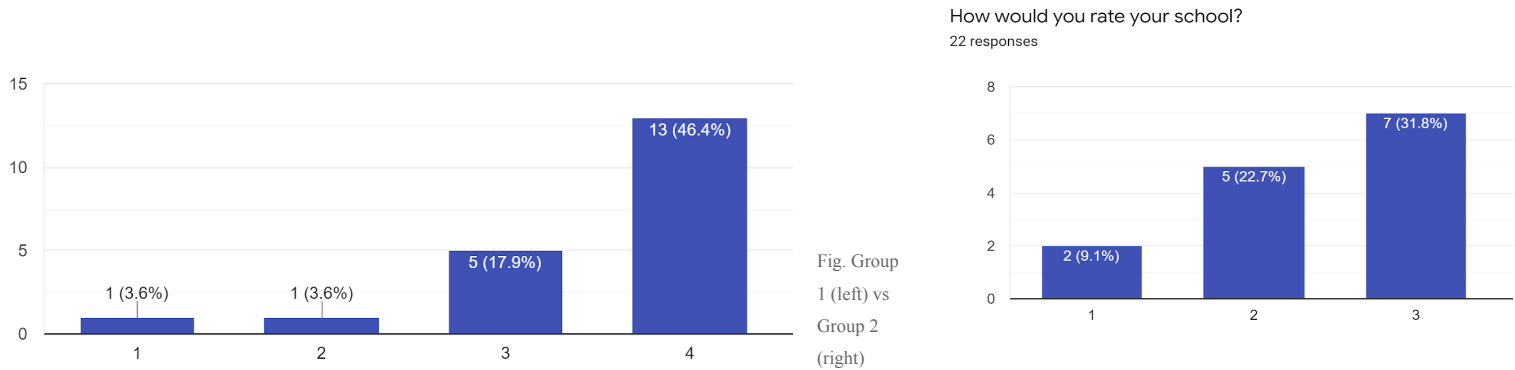


Fig. Group 1 (left) vs Group 2 (right)

The next question asked the participants to rate their schools. The most common response for Group 1 was 3 out of 5 while Group 2 responded with a 4 out of 5.



The next series of questions explore the school's ECA facilities that show that a little over one-third participants of group 1 had marked their ECA facilities as 'Good' whereas almost 50% of the participants from group 2 had the same remark regarding their schools.

How were the Extra Curricular Activity facilities in your school?

22 responses

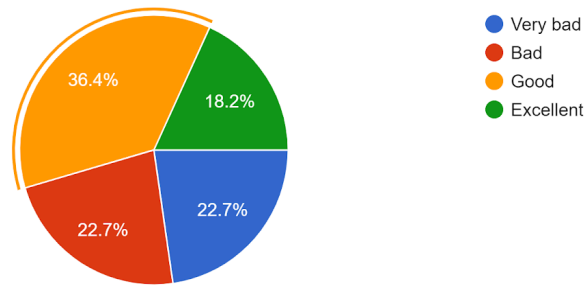


Fig. Group 1

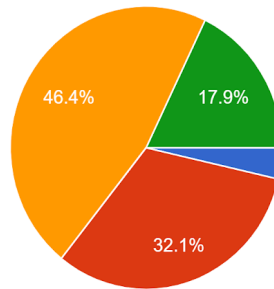


Fig. Group 2

The next series of questions asks the participants to agree or disagree on certain statements about their school life that include:

1. My school clubs were active and the school supported these clubs in every way
2. My school kept me physically active(through sports, exercise, or physical education)
3. My school often arranged contests like science fairs, olympiads, art competition, debates, etc

The results varied a lot among the different schools.

Do you agree to the following statements?

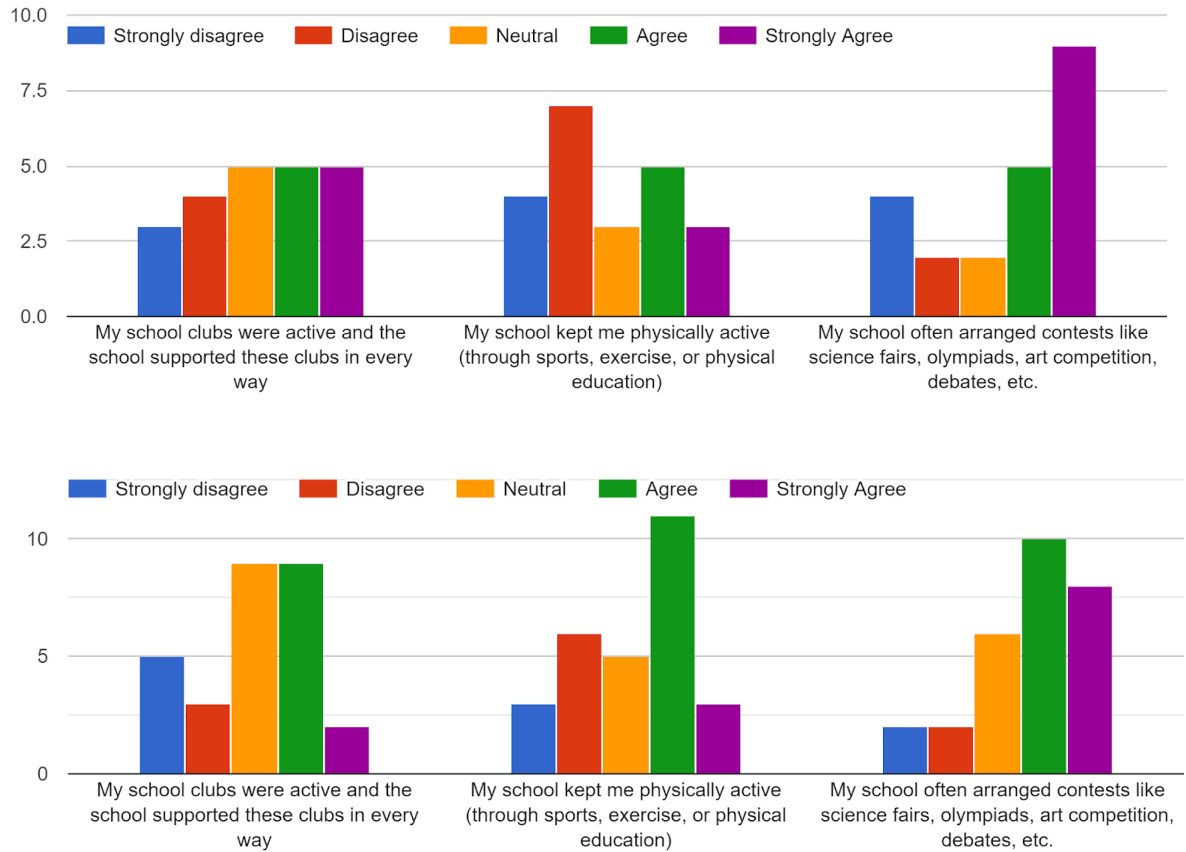
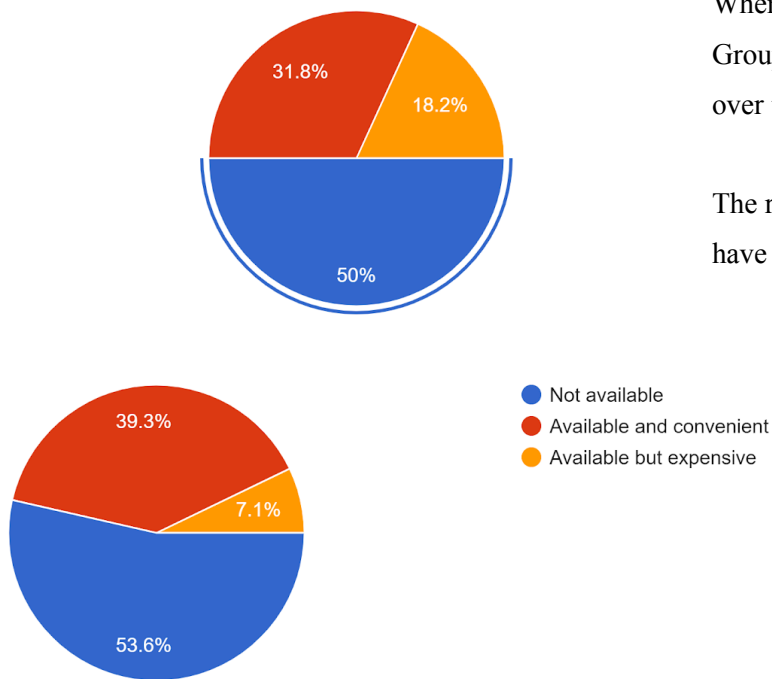


Fig. Group 1 (top) vs Group 2 (bottom)

Did your school have a convenient transportation system?

22 responses



When asked about transport convenience Group 2 had more convenient transportation over the Group 1 participants.

The results of Available and convenient have a difference of about 8%.

Fig. Group 1 (top) vs Group 2 (below)

When asked about the availability of classroom amenities there was a clear distinction between group 1 and group 2 of over 20%.

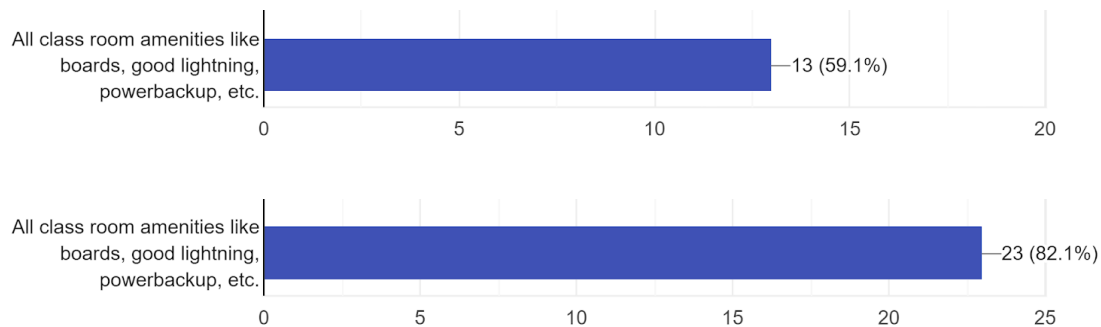


Fig.

Group 1 (top) vs Group 2 (bottom)

A large distinction of over 30% is seen between Group 1 and Group 2 when asked about financial difficulties in their schools.

Did you face educational problems due to financial difficulties?

22 responses

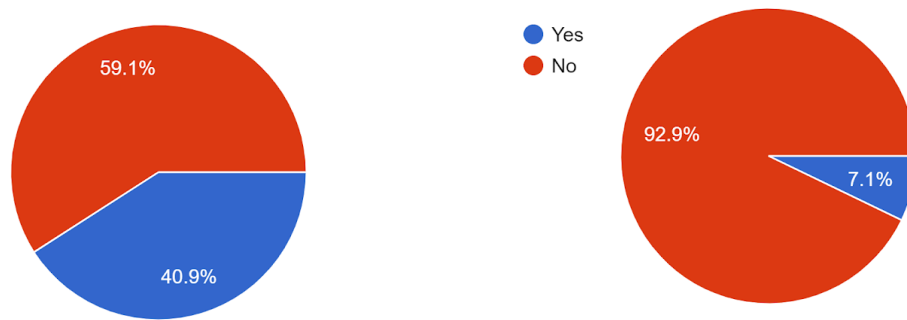


Fig.

Group 1 (left) vs Group 2 (right)

Group 1 also had some compelling comments on this section like:

“Well, due to financial problems, I was late to submit the school fees so they tweaked my final result.”

“Committee members were very interfering and harassed everyone who's fees were due more than a few days long”

“It affected my study skills”

“Could not buy new books”

While N/A is the most popular answer from Group 2.

The next questions were:

- How much has your school prepared you for your future (higher education and career)?
- How important was your school in shaping your life?
- Is the change positive or negative?

For the first question, Group 1 said 40.9% didn't get any preparation while there were only 17.9% from Group 2. 40.9% of the group 1 participants claimed that their school had nearly no contributions to shaping their futures on the other hand only 7.1% of the Group 2 participants gave the same answer. In Group 2, 10.7% participants said the change was negative while 36.4% of group 2 participants felt the same way.

A question was asked to determine whether the way different subjects were taught at schools of participants had an influence on their career choices. 7 out of 10 people from group 2 believed if a subject was taught in a better way, they would have chosen a different career path while 5 out 10 people from group 1 had similar thoughts.

If your school had taught a subject differently, would you have chosen a different career?

22 responses

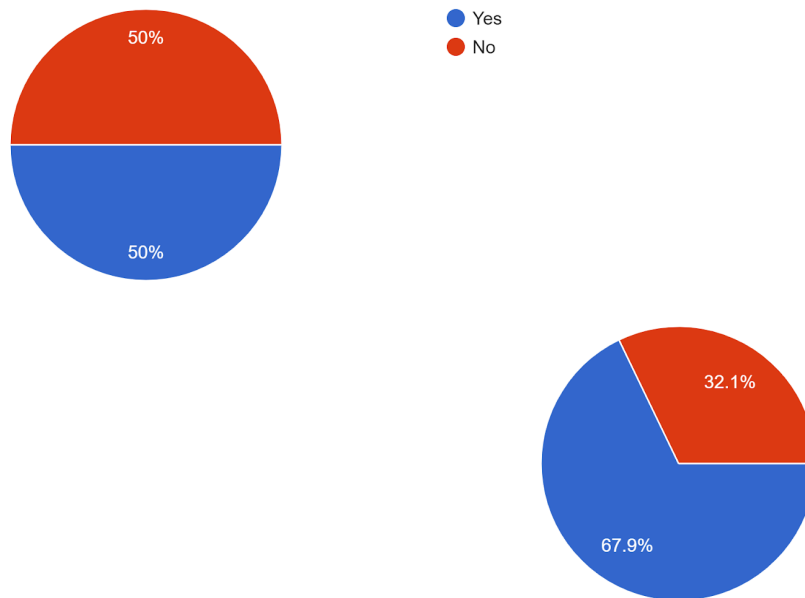
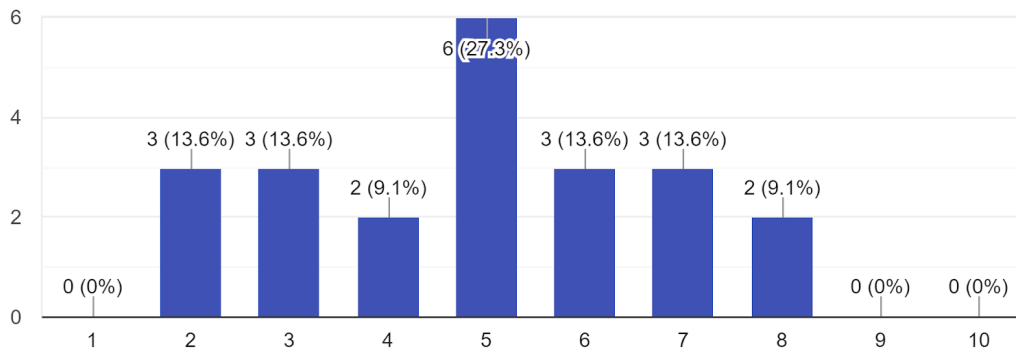


Fig. Group 1 (left) vs Group 2 (right)

To understand how convenient are online classes for the two groups, they were asked to rate their online class experience. The average rating from group 1 was a 5 on a scale of 1 to 10 where the later group gave an average rating of 7. Also, the demand for stopping online classes was 25% more prevalent among the group 1 participants.

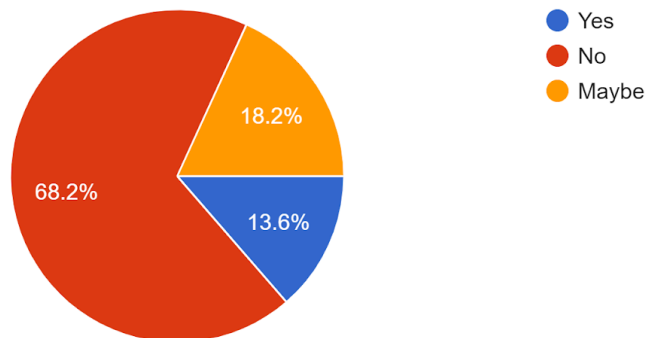
How was the experience of online classes?

22 responses



Do you feel this online education should continue even after corona ends?

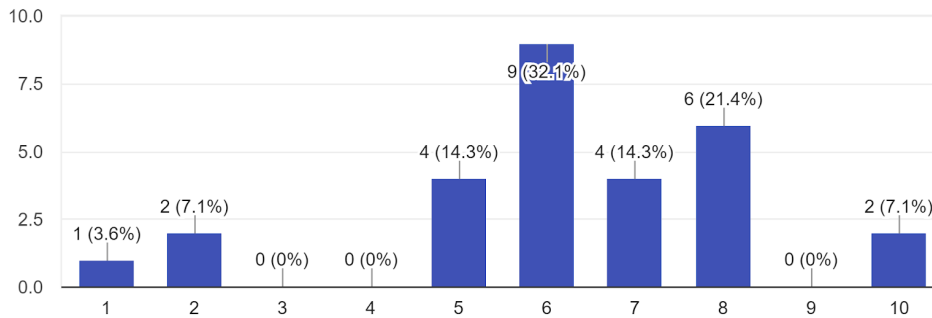
22 responses



Figures (top and bottom): Answers from Group 1

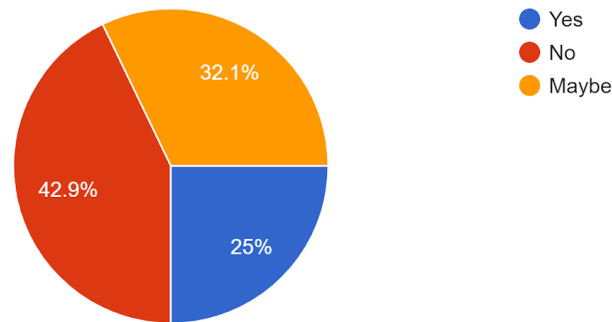
How was the experience of online classes?

28 responses



Do you feel this online education should continue even after corona ends?

28 responses



Figures (top and bottom): Answers from Group 2

Analysis/ Discussion

The survey deep dives into the differences in schooling among students of lower middle class, middle class (Income less than BDT 50 000) and upper class households (Income BDT 50 000 and above).

First, we look at the different privileges that students from upper class households- Group 2, get to enjoy in their schools. It is clear that most students of upper class families gave better reviews to their schools. This high regard can be linked to the better Extra Curricular Activity (ECA) facilities provided by the schools along with their schools' efforts to keep students engaged and healthy in school. They also

enjoyed better classroom amenities and transportation options from their schools. We also see that these students also had a great deal of help from their school when it came to preparing for their future and shaping their lives.

For the students of middle class and lower middle class households- Group 1, the scenario turns quite bleak. They provided a lower rating to their schools which can be caused by the subpar facilities of ECA and their schools' lack of providing an engaging or healthy environment to their students. They had poorer studying conditions in school with usually no access to transportation. Most students of these families have faced educational problems due to financial difficulties coupled with harassment from their schools for various financial reasons. A higher percentage has agreed that they would have changed their schools if possible.

The disparity between the two groups is rather vastly. The difference of a few thousand taka had major impacts on nearly all aspects of their schooling. While students from upper class families did not have perfect schools, they were far away from the horrid school experiences faced by students from lower income families. Money plays an important role in this scenario because it allows schools to afford better facilities, amenities and teachers. The fact that upper class families can always afford to change schools and are willing to pay a handsome amount for their child's education, creates a competitive market of schools that are always trying to provide the best of everything in order to attract more students. On the other hand, we find that students of lower middle class and middle class families face tons of hardships in school because of the school's low funds that causes the school to skip on certain amenities and facilities. However, the vast differences are certainly heart breaking because education is a basic human right and inequality in this industry could be extremely harmful.

The experimentation also had its own limitations. In this experiment, due to limited data we could not explore why schools of middle class family students lack amenities even though some Bangla Medium and English Version public schools enjoy government benefits and subsidies. A proper metric for measuring a student's merit could not be added into the survey due to the fact that it raises self bias and discomfort among many participants.

The survey also returned certain accidental errors and outliers that have been filtered for proper analysis.

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