

# The reversal of no-detention policy is regressive

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He smelt of failure. He was 12 years old and sat in a corner at the back. The maths teacher would slap him every day. Dread would grip us from before the maths class, but he seemed inured to the pain and humiliation. The smell was familiar from my earlier schools. Not an odour, but resignation and defiance together in his being, when in class. He had failed in the exams and had been detained in that class. He did not return to school after the vacation. No one got to know what happened. This was almost 40 years ago.

Till the no-detention policy (NDP) of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RTE) came into force, failure and detention were intimate part of the lives of students. In my 12 years of schooling across five schools, I encountered many children who had failed and had been detained. Much was common between them. All of them were from relatively disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. I cannot recollect a single child from a socially privileged or upper-middle-class home. Detention didn't help any of them learn any better in the slightest; it made things worse. Many failed again, and were detained again. Many dropped out of school and most from our lives.

There was a lot more that was common to them and us. They were nice and naughty, like any of us. They were neither dumber nor sharper, than any of us. And at least two of them had a riotous sense of humour, keeping everyone in splits. But this normal life was eviscerated the moment they entered the class, replaced by failure.

It is very likely that you would remember similar children from your days in school. Nice, average children, their lives gutted by exam failure. Are these memories tinted by the immaturity of our childhood minds?

Educational research is thriving globally. As can be expected, much of this research is about "what" helps or hinders learning of children. Every such "what" has an astounding number of studies, in rigorously peer-reviewed journals. Helpfully, like in many other fields, in education too there are "meta-studies" (or meta-analysis) available. These are analytical studies of a wide range of research studies on any particular matter to try and combine their results to draw systematic conclusions, if there are any.

John Hattie, professor of education at the University of Auckland, has done something that can only be called a meta-meta-study. It is a synthesis of over 800 meta analyses, which encompass over 52,600 research studies, across the entire range of matters that impact students and their learning—from curriculum and teacher behaviour to student

background and school characteristics, and a lot more. His book, *Visible Learning*, is a readable summary of this gargantuan exercise. The careful researcher that he is, Hattie is cautious in stating his conclusions, despite the massive underlying research base. But this evidence is so overwhelming on some matters, that Hattie has to resort to plain speaking, not the caveated language of research.

Let me quote him on detention (alternatively called “retention”) from the book: “The effects of flunking are immediately traumatic to the children and the retained children do worse academically in the future, with many of them dropping out of school altogether... it would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative.”

Some of the many details of this unequivocal conclusion follow. Among students at similar achievement levels, those who are detained do not learn more than those who are promoted. Over a period of time, those who are promoted learn more. Those who are detained are very likely to drop out of school. Detained children are almost four times more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. The threat of detention is not a motivating force in any way for children to learn. Detention has deeply damaging social and psychological effects.

Clearly the fault is not in our memories. Rigorous research across decades, across the world, says the same as our memory: detention is completely dysfunctional educationally and deeply corrosive psychologically.

Parliament has recently amended the RTE to effectively cancel the NDP and allow for detention of children in classes III, V and VIII. This amendment enables one of the most regressive actions possible in education. Those who know better have not stood their ground. They have succumbed to a wide coalition which is failing in performing its role and is hell-bent on punishing the children for this failure. Parents, teachers, education administrators, policymakers, politicians, community leaders and more are complicit. The education policy in this country has taken many steps forward in the past few decades. This is one big step back. It has to be fought and reversed.

Let me quote Hattie again: “The only question of interest relating to retention is why it persists in the face of this damning evidence.” The answer is quite simple. School education is often an intense struggle for many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The system fails in addressing the issues of these children and teaching them well. Society seems to need someone to shoulder the blame. Punishing children with no power to protest for the failure of everyone else in the system is just a convenient and cynical transfer of culpability.

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