

Limitations of standardized tests

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The Indian student who leaves high school would have already taken hundreds of tests and examinations. This reality has not changed much in decades. What purpose does this testing serve?

A test can be used to choose a few from a large number, which is what organizations do when deciding whom to recruit. Such a test assesses whether the person who has applied for a role has the required capacities.

We know that testing cannot assess all the capacities. In fact, it may not be able to assess the most important ones. This is why testing is often used as a preliminary “shortlisting” tool, followed by other methods of assessment such as group discussions and interviews and the evaluation of past work. Not even in our wildest imagination will we recruit solely on the basis of a test for our own organization.

A test can also be used to certify a person. Passing examinations can certify an individual as a professional accountant or a medical practitioner. But such certification often uses more complex assessment, not just standard tests. In another form, the diagnostic test identifies what the person does not know adequately, and therefore needs to spend more time on.

Let us note two other matters related to testing. First, the simplicity and efficiency of tests make them easy to administer. Second, that the worst tests can be so narrow that all that they assess is mere rote memorization. The better tests can do a lot more, assessing complex capacities such as problem-solving and critical thinking.

However, there is often a trade-off between the efficiency of testing and the useful information that it produces. It is possible to design and implement complex tests for individuals and small groups that produce rich information, but the customization, complexity and investment of time of good assessors reduce efficiency.

Here is the problem. Very little of the testing in our education system serves the student or her learning. It is mostly used to compare, to rank students, and to offer or deny further opportunities. Such testing pretends to be objective, but is rarely so. Every one of us who has experienced such testing is acutely aware of its severe limitations and the stress it produces. We will never depend solely or primarily on them for important decisions. Still, the testing of children seems unstoppable.

One of the most egregious tortures that we put children through is the various kinds of college entrance processes. Almost all of these are dependent on testing to select for admission or the results of “board exams”. The test-trauma that afflicts the life of children of this age is well-known. Unfortunately, it is also equally well-entrenched in our society. So, by widespread social sanction, here is what we are saying: While we know the severe limitations of standardized testing, we will use it to make one of the most important decisions in the lives of all our children. And let our children suffer now and consequently.

This kind of testing for college entrance and the “board exam” is the prototypical example of high-stakes testing. Combine the limited real usefulness of tests with high stakes, and we have the perfect recipe for dysfunctionality that has afflicted our education system for decades, each child being judged to have passed or failed, based on tests.

What could have a higher stake than judging a child to be a failure? The perversity of this system becomes even clearer when one realizes that the responsibility of the education system is to make sure each child learns to his or her potential. It is not to label them, declaring some as failures.

The first big step to change this perverse test-tyranny was taken by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE). The RTE abolished examinations and the related policy of failing children and detaining them in the same grade, up to class VIII. Testing was replaced by the much better Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation system (CCE). CCE regularly assesses student progress in multiple ways and uses the feedback in the teaching-learning process. It gives a continuous progress record and specific inputs for improving learning. Research evidence across the world suggests that such methods, called formative assessments, tend to improve student learning. Interpreted well, they also inform the teacher what she needs to do to improve her teaching. For once, our education system attempted to turn away from testing that just labelled the child to serve external interests, to assessment that could give useful information to the teacher and student.

But we now have a chorus of demands to abolish CCE and the no-detention policy (NDP). As a result, it appears certain now that the RTE will be amended to enable the reintroduction of examinations in elementary schools (up to class VIII)) and the scrapping of the NDP. If implemented, this takes our educational system a few steps back.

The CCE does everything testing can do and more, with much better consequences. It just doesn't give the reductionist method of sorting and classifying children that testing does. And this is inconvenient to some education administrators, educators, and even many parents. Educating each child is their responsibility, but it is far easier to transfer that responsibility to the child and declare her to have passed or failed.

It is quite remarkable that we are willing to return to testing and labelling our children, the limitations and perversity of which we are all aware of. Our children cannot complain. But the damage to their education and the costs inflicted on the nation's future are there

to stay.

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