

The education battle cry

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Let me present two proposals for your endorsement, advocacy, and in case you are in a seat of power for immediate implementation. Both are about improvement.

The first is about how to make India a serious contender for the football World Cup. We must implement a rigorous system of assessment for our footballers. We should do this at all levels: from the schools up to the national team. This will help separate the good from the bad, who can then be given a few chances to improve. If they don't they can be asked to play something else. A few other things will also need to be done, but the pivot will be this rigorous performance-based accountability system, which will quickly put India in contention for the World Cup.

The second proposal is about improving the fortunes of the multi-business, multi-geography, multinational company which has continued to perform poorly. Since business is all about selling, we must focus on where it really happens. A transparent system of performance-based incentives and accountability should be set up, rewarding sales people who do well and getting rid of those who don't. This will surely help regain market share and improve margins.

I can hear your protests on the short-sightedness of the preceding arguments, if you have taken them seriously.

It's obvious that if we have to become a football superpower, we will have to improve infrastructure, coaching, facilities, community engagement, marketing, etc. The last thing you would do is to discourage already engaged footballers, because as is obvious: bad footballers are not stopping us from winning the World Cup. In the case of the corporation, with its uniformly poor performance across businesses and regions, the one thing that you can be sure of is that its precarious state is not because of the sales people in the trenches, it has a much deeper set of strategic problems.

These are both examples of scapegoating accountability on the least empowered people in a system. The root causes of such systemic dysfunction are complex and inter-related, and such scapegoating improves nothing. If anything, it creates disengagement and fear in the "trenches".

So why do we not see the short-sightedness of such approaches in education? Why do we think scapegoating teachers is a solution for the state of our education?

One popular battle-cry is: let's fix teacher accountability. This is imagined to be done by having a standardized assessment of learning of students. This is identical to the football and troubled-corporation example. For sure, there are good teachers and bad teachers, most of them are the average ones, but sifting them on the basis of their performance as reflected in student learning will not lead to a positive change in a system which is overall performing poorly. An aside: managing truant and misbehaved teachers is not an educational issue (requiring student assessment); it's a socio-political issue.

For the past 10 years, the US has driven an assessment-based teacher (and school) accountability system through the No Child Left Behind programme (and its cousin: Race to the Top). It has failed to make any differential positive impact on US education. If anything, it has fostered a culture of teaching-to-the-test, narrowing of curriculum, fear in teachers and schools, the disadvantaged getting further left behind and widespread cheating.

What has happened in the case of the No Child Left Behind programme is a result of the essential nature of education. Such external (not done by the teacher herself) assessment of students, its uses and implications end up corrupting and vitiating the process of education. In the field of education, scapegoating teachers is doubly dysfunctional: like in any other field and because of its vitiating effect on the very core of the educational process.

There is no doubt that the role of the teacher makes her responsible for her students and their education, and she must discharge this responsibility to the best of her ability, within the constraints that face her. A sensible, empowering approach to managing teachers, including a fair multi-dimensional performance management system, will help substantially.

The current system, however, does not empower her, nor support her adequately. The inadequacy of our teachers is a symptom of the deeper problems of our education system: the alienating management systems, pathetic pre-service teacher education, dysfunctional and mis-aligned institutional structures, inadequate investment, archaic examination and textbook system, ineffective community engagement, etc. This is without even considering the daunting and special challenges of India: socio-cultural-economic diversity, large majority of first-generation school-goers, linguistic complexity, etc. We need to work on all this and refrain from finding scapegoats.

Much of our popular imagination (from the politician to the average parent) continues to crave for performance-based-accountability of teachers. This is just another expression of the desire for quick, simple fixes; which never work, and often cause harm. The same popular imagination is unmindful that the teachers themselves have another set of ready scapegoats: "What can we do if the students are so bad?" This creates a full circle of dysfunction.

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