

# Expectations and understanding of education

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There is a 600 sq. km area with 24 villages, called Bhakhar, in Sirohi district. It's all low hillocks, with scores of streams crisscrossing at the foot. Living conditions are tougher than adjoining areas. Getting around is more difficult, and there is hardly any cultivable land.

There was a community meeting in a panchayat hall in Bhakhar. It was a dialogue on how to improve their schools. After a lively discussion, a lady asked a question and then many lent their voice to it. They all wanted to know why examinations were being stopped in schools. How would they know whether the children were learning if they didn't get examination scores?

There are very sound educational and pedagogical reasons for using methods like Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), despite its implementation being complex and difficult. The country is discovering these challenges, now that the Right to Education Act has mandated CCE up to grade VIII. In CCE every child's learning is assessed on an ongoing basis, and that is used in an integrated manner to teach the child better. As an example, that a child is having problem with fractions, is assessed in the class, the issues carefully noted, and then relevant strategies used in the next classes to help the child. This method is in sharp contrast to the child taking a test at the end of the term and getting poor scores on fractions, which is of little use, aside from telling the child "you didn't do well". The CCE system develops a rich document of a child's progress on multiple dimensions, through the term, which is pedagogically useful. But it doesn't give any scores or "marks".

It was this issue that was being referred to in the panchayat hall in Bhakhar. We had a long discussion on that question. We tried to converse about CCE in common language, not education-speak. The simplicity of scores, the clarity of pass or fail, and the social importance of "marks", all this and more were battling with CCE in their minds. The conversation didn't leave them satisfied, but there was some progress.

Elsewhere, in a big city there was another meeting. It was a plush conference room, uncomfortable despite its size and the air conditioner. The minister of education of a large state was sitting opposite me. It's because of this he kept looking at me, as he asked the question, though it was addressed to others as well. The question was the same as in Bhakhar, though his interest in it was for different reasons. He said that since "you educationists" had decided to drop exams, it must be the right thing to do. But he didn't understand why it was so, and when the people in his constituency questioned him, he felt

at a loss. There were more than 20 of us whom he had classified as educationists. We didn't give him a satisfactory answer. The educationists didn't speak a language to which he could relate. Some dismissed the question silently as if it had a self-evident answer. He didn't leave any better informed.

CCE is an example of the wide gap between the average person's expectations and understanding of education, and our policies and curricula.

Our curricula and policies increasingly reflect what I have elsewhere (Mint, October 2012) called the "progressive consensus". This consensus includes attempts to move away from rote learning, building analytical ability, learning-to-learn, etc. It is informed by developments in fields as varied as psychology, neuro-sciences, sociology, and philosophy. It is based on the nature of knowledge, the principles of how children learn and develop, the integral role of social context and the humanistic, liberal democratic aims of education. In their design our curricula bring together what is educationally effective and is socially important. While there is a large gap between the curricula and policies, and their implementation, there is clarity on which way our education is supposed to go. It is important to preserve this broad consensus. Can we take this for granted?

I sense a significant risk. Many stakeholders including parents, political and community leaders, and large number of teachers are more comfortable with the older methods which seem to be more easily understood, as in the case of assessment. Their expectations are also influenced by current social factors and the history of education practice.

This gap between the progressive consensus and expectations of people, in the backdrop of broader social-economic dynamics like commercialization of education and political polarization makes the consensus very, very fragile. Not from within, but from outside. I fear that the primacy of the consensus in determining policy may wither away, and it will be left only in name in a few documents.

We need to recognize this risk, and work on it as much as on the policy implementation gap. We must avoid the temptation to ignore those who disagree or (we think) do not understand. This requires a genuine dialogue, in a language that people relate to, and not from some intellectual high-ground. It is important that the minister and the people of Bhakhar remain part of the debate.

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