

Education system should have ideal, not practical, goals

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A month ago I wrote about the problems that teachers are having in using continuous comprehensive evaluation (CCE). A friend who read it wrote back to me with a simple question.

Her question was that if it is so difficult to implement CCE, why does the Right to Education Act, 2009, mandate it for all the schools across the country? In general, isn't it better to try and implement something that is practical, rather than aim for the ideal which is clearly unworkable in the current conditions?

A recap on CCE: it is a method of assessment of a child's learning on an ongoing basis and it is used in the class to teach the child better. CCE replaces tests up to the eighth grade; it doesn't give any scores or marks. Such an assessment method serves many goals. For example, it helps in improving learning rather than judging children, it focuses on multiple capacities of the child and not on testing rote, and it's non-threatening and so, socio-psychologically better for the child.

There are many hurdles to CCE actually getting implemented. Some of these are: teachers have to handle 30-40 kids together across multiple grades together, leaving no time for the subtleties of CCE, teachers lack the capacities required to use something like this effectively, the pedagogical approach in reality in most schools remains rooted to rote, etc.

So then, why try for something like CCE? Why not settle for something more practical? Especially when the implementation has to be across the massive Indian schooling system, which has about 1.5 million schools and over 200 million students.

In my view, we must decide education (including its components) as it ought to be. We should derive goals for our education system from this ought to be, let's call these the ideal goals. On the other hand, what I am calling practical, are goals that are incremental, seemingly achievable improvements within the current constraints of the average school. I will list three reasons why our goals have to be the ideal, and not the practical. The comments that follow are general and use CCE only as an illustration. Examples of other such issues could be: the curriculum of schools, the design of our teacher education system, the culture of school management, etc.

Today, our system does a shoddy job of what actually needs to be practical. To be successful, the planning and its execution to get to any goal must be practical, that is, must take in to account realities on the ground, develop relevant strategies, execute with rigour, and not compromise on the goals even if the progress is incremental. Our education system (with few notable exceptions) doesn't do all this. It takes any goal, converts it in to some procedures and documents and considers its task done. It has an extraordinary ability to take out the spirit of everything, and convert it in to a mechanical tick-the-box approach.

To go back to the CCE example, most states seem to believe that it will get done magically across the thousands of schools, with some minor training of teachers, and some checklists to be filled. The goals must be ideal, but the execution plan must be practical. No great insight in this, but mostly we don't get it.

Aiming for the ideal goals on even one aspect of education (for example, assessment) presents an opportunity to improve other aspects. This is because of the integrated nature of education. Assessment, teacher capacity, teacher education, pedagogy, curriculum, school and system management, culture, etc., are all so intricately and organically linked that efforts to change one dimension necessarily means changes on other dimensions. For real improvement, all must move with some synchronicity, while perfect coordination may be impossible. A practical goal by definition arises from an acceptance of current state of affairs taking them as constraints, whereas an ideal goal is a potential lever to change all aspects of the system.

Articulating practical goals for a system only deepens inequity in an already iniquitous structure. This happens because in reality the practical becomes a goal for the disadvantaged; whereas the privileged strive for the ideal as their goal, pushed by both internal and external forces. The well-off schools were doing versions of CCE, long before it was mandated. The deep impact of this divergence of goals is manifold because the disadvantaged schools that need support and resources get it with only the practical goals in sight. This has a determining impact on those who need support most, i.e., the large majority of our 1.5 million schools.

Such choices have cumulative, historical effects and they cannot be unwound. So, a society or nation committed to equity and democracy must decide what education ought to be and then go for it, for the whole system. It's then that the burden of making it happen becomes clearer, and the society has to figure out how to make it happen, obliged to do whatever is required and provide whatever support is needed.

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