

Education: Who is accountable?

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There is a lot of talk of accountability in education. This is directly related to the increasing anxiety about performance of schools, across the world, as well as in India. Most often the talk is of accountability of teachers. The explicit subtext is that the key reason why our school education is in poor shape is that schools and teachers are not accountable.

Why is this issue so vexed? Shouldn't it be quite simple, teachers and schools should be accountable for the learning of children? Let's consider some aspects of this issue, let's start with the word "accountability" and its usage.

Much of the usage of that word today has roots in the notions arising from the world of business. Those notions are modelled on mechanistic systems, where people are given tasks, made responsible for something, and then they are accountable for delivering the results. The task would have dependencies, resource constraints and environmental challenges. The world of business recognizes all this, and factors it to some extent, but on the whole approximates to the mechanistic model.

Sales people are accountable for their targets, factories for their output and quality, and chief executive officers (CEOs) for earnings growth. The mechanistic model struggles with accountability of human resource people and R&D engineers, but businesses gloss over that as aberrations which need to be accommodated as best as possible within the model. The use of this mechanistic notion of accountability for social institutions and processes is a basic problem. If we think of Parliament being accountable for developing a better India, we will get a sense of what I am talking about. Indeed Parliament is responsible for developing a better India, but not alone and not in a mechanistic manner, unlike achieving sales targets for soaps for the year.

Schools can be easily misread as mere service delivery mechanisms. It doesn't help matters that many schools do behave as commercial outlets. All this makes them seem fit for the mechanistic model of accountability.

This is a fundamental flaw. Schools are anything but mechanistic systems; they are some of the most fundamental social institutions. And education is a complex process based on human relationships, with broad humanistic, social and democratic aims. This certainly includes what are generally talked of as the basic goals of learning (e.g. in language, math), but goes well beyond and deeper than that.

So in systems like this, is it not possible to talk of accountability? Indeed it is, once we dump the notion of mechanistic accountability. Teachers and others in the school system have significant space for creative and good work, which gives them definite responsibility, but not mechanistic accountability. One way to think of it is that school systems have a web of accountability—including for learning. Participants in this system have various accountabilities, all linked and related to each other. For the system to function well, these accountabilities must be aligned with each other, and with the aims of education.

Schools as organizations have an accountability to the regulations that govern them. Teachers have accountability for certain hygiene factors, e.g. showing up at work, banishing corporal punishment. Teachers also have a deep accountability to a code of professional conduct and behaviour, which arises from the idea of education, of which they are the most important custodians. The community around the school is accountable for nurturing the school. Parents are accountable for getting their children in school and (many of them) for the complex interplay of the home environment with the school.

Some sets of experts are accountable for developing a curricular framework and structure, which is educationally sound and responsive to the ideals of the society. The teacher education system is accountable for the preparation of our teachers. Those who conduct school leaving examinations are accountable for the examinations to assess real education. "Higher up administrators" are accountable for the culture, effectiveness of mechanisms and providing support where required. The government is accountable for the level of public financing and regulatory structure for the school system. We, i.e. you and me, are accountable for the societal expectations that we set for education and the relative priority that we give to it in reality.

This web of accountability is not a snapshot of a moment, but has built cumulatively, historically over time, (e.g.) that there is no one group of experts accountable for the curricular framework, but many groups collectively over the past few decades. This whole account would be enormously frustrating for those looking for who to hold accountable for the learning levels in schools.

Can we think of a war in the past 6,000 years, where the soldiers can be held accountable for defeat? That's not because soldiers are not important, they are most important. But we know that the complexity of war is such that soldiers in themselves are not accountable for the war and its outcome.

Education is far more complex than war, not only because it's a continuing social enterprise; there is no simple way of thinking about accountability in education.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education.

Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com. To read Anurag Behar's previous columns, go to www.livemint.com/othersphere

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