

Schools And Colleges How Good Are Our Best?

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by world standards"*

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Contemporary educational debates and struggles in India have largely focused on the issue of access to higher education, especially professional courses in the engineering, medical and management fields. While increasing access is clearly important, the issue of significantly improving the quality of what is taught and learnt in our schools and colleges should now be receiving far more attention. Public opinion is simply not aware that our entire educational system, including the vast majority of our best schools and colleges, is hugely substandard.

Two decades of research have established unequivocally that most children complete five years of schooling in our government schools acquiring very limited literacy and numeracy skills. This initial deficit is not significantly made up by many who make it to the Standard 10 board examinations. It is mainly students from the poor and lower middle classes, who attend government schools, that have suffered from the prevailing orthodoxy that access issues need to be solved before improving quality.

What is the quality of teaching and learning provided by our best English medium schools, which de facto cater to the middle and upper classes? Contrary to popular belief, here too the quality of education provided in most of these institutions is extremely mediocre. Middle and upper class Indian parents, after spending enormous amounts of time and money on the nerve-racking business of getting their children into these schools, feel that they have arrived. Most students from the institutions do well in competitive examinations, and are therefore more likely to be selected by elite institutions of higher education. Consequently, there is a widespread belief among parents and educators that both the quality of teaching and learning must be reasonably good in our best English medium schools.

The results of a large-scale study conducted by Educational Initiatives and Wipro last year, flatly contradicts this rosy view. From the best 142 English medium schools in 5 metropolitan cities - Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi - 32,000 students were selected from Classes 4, 6 and 8. They were administered tests to evaluate their understanding of key concepts in Mathematics, Science and English. Students fared very poorly in questions testing understanding or application of knowledge to new situations. They were only able to do answer questions based on recall or standard procedures. They were simply unable to answer questions that appeared to be different from what they typically encountered in their textbooks. Whatever else our best schools may claim to be teaching, clearly most of them are failing miserably in one of their principal goals viz. to help students understand what is learnt, relate it to the world outside the classroom and to think critically.

Are schools in other countries doing a better job of teaching their children?

We have no objective basis to make any comparative judgments, as India does not participate in international studies of student achievement. However, the study on our best schools did include 11 questions on maths and science that were taken from an international study of 43 participating countries. The results are indicative. Class 4 students from our best schools scored lower than even the average performance of Class 3 students from these 43 countries on the same 11 questions. Even though this evidence is limited, it surely indicates that there is something rotten in the state of our top English-medium schools if our best students are performing worse than average students in other countries.

A similar false consciousness exists about the quality of our elite institutions of higher education. In the recently published 2007 Times Higher Education World University rankings, not a single Indian institution featured in the top 200 universities. Of the 26 Asian universities featuring in this list, Japan had 11 and China had 6. Hong Kong, which has less than half the population of Mumbai, had 4 universities in this top 200.

Nothing will improve unless we are prepared to radically change what is taught, learnt and evaluated in all our educational institutions. From our best educational institutions to our worst, from preprimary classes to postgraduate levels, almost the entire enterprise of teaching and learning, with few exceptions, is geared to formulas and procedures involving students in the “by hearting”, and reproduction of a vast array of facts.

In order to bring about this change, we need not do away completely with rote learning. For example, despite the easy availability of calculators, children should learn their multiplication tables by heart. Memorising poems and speeches, a common practice in many schools in the past, has many benefits. Besides a decades-old tradition of denouncing rote learning, we have not had a serious discussion on its contemporary relevance, albeit a very limited one, for what is taught and learnt in schools.

Children from Indian immigrant families often do very well in schools and universities abroad. That they thrive there is a vision of what is possible here in our own country, and our enormous waste of student talent and potential. We need to begin the task of reforming an educational system based on rote learning to one which promotes critical thinking and practical skills. But there will be no takers for this task, unless we squarely face the reality that most of even our best educational institutions are extremely substandard, and the rest are essentially “time-pass” institutions, where students and faculty are energised only by the spectre of examinations.

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