

Exams: fearsome tool of exclusion

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The killing of a second grader by an older student in Ryan International School, Gurugram, is disturbing. Even more shocking is the finding that just prior to this murder, a few children had brought poison to the school to kill others in order to postpone the forthcoming exams.

We may conveniently categorise this as a murder by a juvenile and an instance of increased violence among children. However, while violence is just one aspect of this unfortunate incident, the main reason is something that is embedded deep in our society and our education system. This is a matter of learning, merit and their demonstration in the form of scorecards. It is also about what is valued in our society.

Learning is a very personal and personalised process. Still, the subject matter that is taught and the pace at which a child is tested is decided by the boards. It has to be institutionalised and certified as an essential requirement of a developed society. These modes and pace of learning are assumed to be uniform for all the children in our existing system.

A student's learning in a subject must be documented by putting him through an examination. If a child lacks in performance on these pre-decided domains and pace, he is excluded, rather 'pushed out' of the system.

Since staying with the majority by proving oneself on the criteria decided by others is a powerful force for students, teachers and parents, examination becomes the focal point of our system. In today's social arrangements, in order to have a so-called "successful life," there is no escape from examinations.

This system has worked and continues to work for most of us. However, we have not been able to acknowledge its failure. What happens when a child is not ready to fit in and conform to the system, while his parents want a scorecard and the school is ready with its uniform assessment tools? What resort does it leave the child with?

He will get sucked into the cycle of self-apprehension, poor performance and isolation from the system. Someone may take extreme steps and kill themselves to get rid of the burden of exams permanently; or kill other children to postpone the exams, like it happened in the Ryan International School's case.

The examination system emerges as an essential demon which overshadows the lives of children, their parents and the teachers. All of them have to prove their worth to it.

Since testing and examination also have their functional value of sorting and assigning people for social roles and rewards, a society cannot afford to really do away with it. However, we can certainly make

friends with the demon and convert it to a friendly entity.

We can make examinations a tool for selection rather than exclusion. As initiated by many progressive schools, examinations can start improving the learning trajectories of children rather than categorising, labelling and detaining them.

Student-friendly tests

The RTE Act (2009) included provisions of no-detention policy with the same idea. It was conceptualised to make school learning-centred, rather than exam-centred. The focus on learning and performance was introduced through an assessment system called the Continuous and Comprehensive Assessment (CCE), which had Formative assessments (FA) and Summative assessments (SA) built into it.

In the CCE, examinations were held in a student-friendly way. It required teachers to work with the students and engage them in learning activities rather than transferring facts into their heads. However, the teachers and the system were unable to implement it efficiently, sometimes owing to institutional responsibilities of teachers and other times due to a lack of intent among them.

Consequently, learning outcomes went down and the government was forced to withdraw the no-detention policy. It was argued that since all children were being promoted irrespective of their performance, the measure was reducing the quality of our education system. With the policy being misunderstood and scrapped this year, we have lost a strong ray of hope of entering into a better world of teaching and learning.

Surely, the new system will produce scorecards, but we also have to be ready for the learners who refuse to consume a mass-delivered education and choose isolation, depression, suicide or murder, to say the least.

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