

Tests that show no results

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Tests aren't all that useful for measuring ability. We need to look at alternative solutions

IT'S HARD to sit by and watch silently. Young people all over India have been in a state of heightened anxiety for the past few months, and even more so now that the results of their exams are coming out. This is a recurring theme, and every year levels of anxiety and tension only seem to be increasing. Board examinations, and exams in general, have become so much a part of our lives that we no longer question them. But this lack of critical analysis cannot go on forever. There are sound reasons why we should be critically examining the exams. They don't really assess learning well, they don't predict achievement in a whole range of other endeavours later in life, and they are constructed to deny large numbers of people opportunities.

Tests and examinations are like tape measures — they're both designed to measure something. A tape can measure height; a test is supposed to measure learning and understanding. Actually, assessment is an inseparable part of the learning process. It is the only way to know whether and what a student has learned. But like a tape measure, it has to be the 'right instrument' for the job. Would you use a calibrated elastic tape to measure height? Or a tape with some centimetres marked longer than others? Both would introduce unacceptable levels of error into the measurement process. Yet our educational system often seems to assess learning using flawed instruments.

To some extent, this is understandable; obviously learning is harder to measure than height. Assessing abstract and complex psychological constructs will in-

evitably involve error. But we read the results of our exams as if there were no error at all. We act as if there were a real difference between an 85 per cent and an 86 per cent! And in some cases, our instrument for assessing learning is so flawed it is like measuring height using a weighing machine. The question of error doesn't even arise—you are simply measuring something else.

In general, the further the assessment moves away from the teaching-learning process the

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more meaningless it becomes. Meaningful assessment is a continuous process of evaluation, meant to benefit both student and teacher. Year-end exams don't serve this purpose. Students need to know where their gaps are, and what they have not understood sufficiently. For a teacher, a test could be one way of finding out which concepts have been understood and which need further reinforcement. The sensible way to use a test is to refine the process of instruction. But I seriously doubt whether parents, schools or students look at tests in this way anymore.

We seem to use tests to measure for the sake of measuring, be it 'knowledge' or 'intelligence'. And we think they do a good job



of it. Good students do well and weak students do badly; isn't that what the test is supposed to accomplish? But there is a basic flaw in this way of thinking. What is taught is highly constrained, almost completely determined, by the tests we are aiming for. Our impression of who are the 'good' and 'weak' students is shaped by the tasks we give them, which in turn are shaped by the tests. We never question this circularity.

What about year-end exams, or the board exams that come at the end of twelve years' schooling? These 'high-stakes tests' have multiple problems. One is the assumption that students who do

well in board exams will also do well in certain real life situations. Let us examine that assumption. Real life involves people (i) working together (ii) over a longer period of time (iii) on open-ended problems (iv) with information available to them. But testing is typically individual, time-bound, closed-ended and closed-book! Naturally, studies have found that test scores correlate well with performance in college, but beyond college the correlations break down considerably.

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which the system is unwilling to give.

Another problem with board exams is in using them as decision-making instruments — as sieves. Those who pass through the holes are those who will get what they want in life... and what about those who don't pass through? I fear that the sieving process for young people has become society's quick-and-dirty method for deciding the worth of a human being. This is allowing us to forget a fundamental truth: that every single human being has value and worth, no matter what her test scores. The limited scope of these exams makes sure that young people with certain

talents (mathematical or analytical abilities, for instance) receive value and respect while others do not. This is the message we constantly give our children. As parents we want our children to be happy and succeed in life—but we tell them that the conditions for happiness and success are paths A, B, C, D and not much else.

Board exams are also seen as a way of allocating limited opportunities to those we think deserve them. And herein lies one of our biggest challenges. In India, we have limited resources that must be shared by millions. This is a real situation that cannot be wished away. As a society, our solution has been to create

competition for those resources. But after years of trying competition, don't we need to stand back and assess the costs, both psychological and ecological? Surely there are creative alternatives to the current system. But how are we to come upon these when we are educated to compete, not cooperate? There must be cooperative solutions, equitable ways of sharing. It will not be easy; but we cannot afford not to try.

It is an interesting situation, and one that requires change at many levels. Classroom environments, examinations, entrance tests, job markets, societal values and human aspirations...these are all inextricably linked. We can't change one while leaving the others unquestioned, and this is often where attempts to improve the situation flounder. A concerned teacher will say, "But I have to prepare them for the exam," and a concerned school will say, "But we are answerable to the parents," and a concerned parent will say, "But how will my child live in this competitive world?" And the child in the middle gets the message that she is worth something only if she has a biggish number attached to her name. The small fragment of children who are deemed to have 'made it' may be all right, but what of the rest? When a child believes she isn't up to the mark, the damage to her sense of worth and psyche can be irreparable.

In all this, we have not even looked at the immeasurables in life. Relationship, responsibility, affection, compassion, sensitivity — do educators ignore these because they can't be assessed?

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