

Questioning the Answers

*When we continue to address the educational challenges in government and low income schools quite differently from those of privileged schools, we tend to give in to the practical concerns of a market-driven environment as opposed to the promotion of sound educational practices across all schools, writes **Anil Mammen**.*

A critique of rote learning is an educational cliché. Much has been written about it and almost every educator will passionately argue against it. However, the textbook still continues to be a holy book. You can do activities and learn. You can test yourself and learn. You can memorise information and learn. But don't forget, the textbook has the answers. This obsession with textbook answers seem to cut across both government as well as private schools in India.

To learn something is to seek out answers. But a textbook supplies ready-made answers to questions that were not necessarily asked. And most times students don't even know what to do with these answers except to write them down during tests.

In *What is Worth Teaching*, Krishna Kumar, former Director of NCERT, says: "The textbook symbolises the authority under which the teacher must accept to work. It also symbolises the teacher's subservient status in the educational culture." In other words, even teachers don't have the autonomy to decide what needs to be taught, forget the autonomy of students to question what they learn.

Right to Truth

The right to education is every student's right to get to the truth, regardless of what kind of school the student goes to. Truth may be elusive. It may be diverse and contradictory. But the pursuit of knowledge is the pursuit of truth. Why are things the way they are? Why do I think and feel the way I do? Why do I go to a local Marathi medium school while my mother's boss's daughter goes to an international school? These are all valid questions, and each of them deserves an explanation.

Certain kinds of knowledge and certain kinds of skills can help students get a job or set up an enterprise. No one denies the role of education in developing these skills. And the idea of helping develop a productive citizenry is not something to be ridiculed at. However, it is equally important for us to acknowledge that developing economic agents for tomorrow is not the sole purpose of education. A skilled workforce is a consequence of a relevant curriculum, capable teachers, and a supportive system of education. But that is not an end in itself.

We brush aside many relevant kinds of knowledge as not even worth examining academically. Mainstream curriculum typically excludes the lived experiences of children from local communities, converting school education into an alien phenomenon for many. Most learning builds on prior knowledge, but when the prior knowledge of many children is not even acknowledged, education becomes a foreign language.

Upper income, urban Indian adolescents too face a disconnect between their private lives and schooling. It is not fair to generalise, but there does exist a certain obsession with the way one looks—rather the need to conform to certain kinds of looks. (How many ‘likes’ for my display pic?) A certain snootiness towards *chawl*-like behaviour, with no understanding or desire to understand what it feels like to live in a *chawl*. And the ease with which other cultures, religions and ways of life are stereotyped.

Without even being aware of it, many students are locked into certain prejudiced positions for life. Current events around the world show us the dangerous side of this unquestioned herd mentality. When we are raising generations in privileged as well as underprivileged silos, who are easily susceptible to being brainwashed one way or the other, we have no right to complain.

Answers for Marks

Our board examination system sends out one clear message to every student: work hard to learn your answers. Clarity and understanding can wait. The question of ‘why you learn what you learn’ can wait. What pays is unquestioned hard work – although very unequally, depending on one’s social and economic support. But at least it pays for some, until the next milestone – which is, securing an admission to a college of one’s choice. In the interim, a student’s identity is reduced to that of a mark or a grade, compared with other ‘marks’ or ‘grades’.

Exam results, just a series of hurdles on the path to becoming a ‘professional label’, are themselves the outcome of something short-term. The ability to store a whole lot of answers in the brain, the ability to solve problems using those given answers and existing formula, and the ability to complete all the questions within a given timeframe. No doubt, it is a lesson in handling pressure, but in a formulaic way. Students come to accept that learning is a game of one-upmanship. A game where you play by the rules. And just like in every game, the rules are not for questioning.

If history is a patterning of memories, then the personal histories of school education may not make a colourful pattern. Except in cases where it helped someone leap out of caste and class barriers. Except where students felt a greater sense of autonomy and freedom to express themselves. And except when they felt at home struggling to find meaning in what they learned.

Beyond Patchwork

Let us not be deceived by advertisements that promise to make learning fun or gamified. Those are just pretty bandages on top of a bleeding issue that many would rather not engage with.

Reports such as Pratham's ASER survey remind us that we have far more fundamental issues to address before we advocate radical changes in curriculum and pedagogy. Perhaps those fundamental issues can only be addressed by radical changes. Many students find it even difficult to read grade appropriate books or solve basic mathematical problems. But there is a tendency to attribute the reasons for low performance to no detention policy (till class 8) or lack of standardised assessments. Many premier educational institutions, including those modelled after Montessori and Waldorf schools, in India as well as abroad do not support detention or standardised assessments, but their students do just fine. Yes, the contexts are different. These are schools for the privileged. There is respectability for qualified teachers, a friendly environment for learning and more autonomy for both teachers and students. Does that mean if you are not privileged, you have to make do with an environment that simply pressurises you to pass your exams? That better infrastructure, better teaching and greater autonomy are far too much to ask? That quality of education is ultimately left to market decisions? That it is okay for our children to start their schooling in vastly unequal contexts?

Questioning the answers around us is not just about challenging established answers in a scientific way. It is about questioning what are passed off as 'practical' solutions to the multitude of problems around us. Because when you refuse to engage with difficult questions, you tend to accept easy answers. But believing in top down 'easy' answers can sometimes be more dangerous than accepting one's ignorance. As James Baldwin so starkly put it like only an African American writer could: "Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

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