

On the New Education Policy and School Board Exams

-Arvind Sardana

One important recommendation in the draft New Education Policy (dNEP) is for a change in the board examination pattern for school leaving children. If implemented, this would be an attempt at a major reform. The recommendation is to follow the principle of assessment of learning rather than push students to be tested.

Still it is unlikely that the progressive ideas of curriculum and pedagogy in the dNEP will be implemented. Why? And what has been the fate of similar such ideas earlier?

Coaching centres, which now dictate so much of the content and classroom process in secondary education and above, do not promote any learning. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) documents in 2005 had expressed similar views. It is obvious that social and market pressures are very strong and these aggressively push students and their parents to aim for higher marks, and therefore for more coaching. The coaching centres create expectations that with their help the student can cross the line for admission in a reputed college like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other such prestigious institutions. It is the slim hope of obtaining a secure future in the midst of run-down institutions and high unemployment that fuels parental aspirations in the race to get 90 plus marks in the board exams.

In the process, thousands of crores of rupees are minted by the coaching industry that obviously has a strong vested interest in continuing with the current examination system. A few years ago Class 11 and 12 students would openly tell you that they were studying in a dummy high school but attending the XYZ coaching institute. These days many of the coaching institutes after taking over the schools, themselves run these high schools. The coaching culture has become the dominant culture for schools and this is now proudly announced.

The dNEP seeks to change this through changes in the board examination pattern. The board examination will focus on core competencies, analysis and higher order skills. This looks like a valid approach. At Eklavya we attempted this for many years in our collaborative programmes with the Government of Madhya Pradesh. These programmes were for science, social science and primary education. A change in the assessment system works provided it is accompanied by long-duration teacher training and a dialogue with teachers on perspective. Classroom processes do change when there is synergy between teacher perspectives, expectations from textbooks and the mode of assessment. Very often, even though textbooks have changed this synergy is lacking and therefore the classroom culture does not change or respond to these new expectations.

The dNEP states,

"Assessment will be transformed to support student development. All examinations (including Board examinations) will test core concepts and skills, along with higher order capacities."

Will this work at the macro level? My own view is that today it will not, though at Eklavya we have been pushing for a change in the template for many years and have successfully demonstrated the possibilities of doing so with an open book examination with government boards for science, social science and primary education. The sample was almost a thousand schools in the case of science -- the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). The processes of alternative examination systems were carried out for over two decades in these programmes. Yet there are no institutional memories of these experiments. The education fraternity does not seek out or consult the large

number of teachers who were involved in designing, conducting and evaluating the alternative examination system.

There are two sets of reasons why the very valid recommendations of the dNEP will not be implemented. One is structural and the other social.

Consider the recent experience of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) process. This was implemented in extensive and detailed formats in total disregard of the spirit of CCE. This created a teacher backlash. CCE was made the devil that had to be banished. To my mind, a similar fate awaits the proposed change in the board examination template. The new template will be implemented in a distorted manner and rote examinations will be reinstated if carried out in the same institutional mindset.

The other reason why it will fail is the separation between the two institutions, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The template for the examinations should be set up and teachers trained in the new perspective by the NCERT. But currently the NCERT does not see this as their role; they claim it is not their turf. This separation from training teachers for alternative assessment systems keeps NCERT in a bubble with no executive role.

On the other hand, the CBSE is forced to follow the status quo and is expected to be completely focused on execution. It concentrates its energy on ensuring a fair and tamper-proof country-wide examination; on marking with the help of model answers and focused essentially on recall to safeguard itself against disputes; adhering to the directions of the courts and constantly tightening its nuts and bolts. It is not in conversation with the NCERT on understanding the assessment for learning since it says this is not its mandate. Given the divide between the NCERT and CBSE, any advisory on a new system of assessment of students will be killed.

These are the institutional weaknesses that would not allow such ideas to be tried out with teachers in any real manner. Superficial attempts will backfire and restore the status quo. Examine closely how board examinations have been reintroduced for Class 5 and 8 and the Right to Education (RTE) Act amended for this purpose. The perception fuelled by the education administration for years and now set in stone is that unless there are board examinations no serious teaching takes places.

There is, however, a deeper social context to the current dominant approach towards testing. The board examinations are usually thought of as institutions that certify a certain level of competency of the students so that they can move further towards college education or other vocations. In our context, board examinations are de facto entrance examinations. The purpose of the school board examinations now is to qualify a few thousand who record high marks, while lakhs fend for themselves in mediocre institutions, and more importantly and distressingly view themselves as “failures”.

Change Entrance Exams

If we wish to change this social set up it is imperative that we begin by changing the most prestigious of entrance examinations such as for the IITs and medical colleges. A change in the template here would be a social marker and set up a chain reaction in the reverse direction and affect the coaching centres as well. What may be called “a counter chain reaction” to the market process.

Let us not deny that coaching centres are successful in cracking the system, thus providing the extra edge that matters for admission. Vast sums of money are spent by parents on sending their children to coaching centres since a small set do make it to the elite institutions. The drill, notes, advice, pressure and tension work for a few. They allow them to cross the line, which they may not have done so on their own. For the vast majority that does not finally succeed in the entrance exams, the coaching

centres initially raise hopes of success, make their parents fork out astronomical amounts and stress students beyond imagination.

Most parents understand this dilemma. However, since this is the only route towards a formal sector job that employs at best 10%-15% of the work force, all of this is accepted as necessary even if a difficult experience. The current system of entrance examinations and coaching industry are together acting as dehumanising social filters that are unfortunately considered necessary to select a few thousand from among lakhs.

The content for these examinations in science and mathematics is far more advanced than the course syllabus set by the national bodies. This is the de facto curriculum. In such an environment, the liberal ideas of the dNEP would soon be declared as unworkable or not applicable to science and mathematics.

On curriculum, the dNEP states:

"The content and process of school education will be reoriented to develop holistic learners. The curriculum load will be reduced to key concepts and essential ideas, thus enabling space for deeper and more experiential learning."

and

"A flexible curriculum - with no hard separation of curricular, co-curricular or extra-curricular areas; nor of arts and sciences, and 'vocational' and 'academic' streams - will enable student choice with the possibility of switching subject areas at the secondary school level."

The coaching industry's syllabi and methods will override such recommendations and remove all the flexibility of optional papers, vocational exposure, and less differentiation between science and arts that the dNEP desires. The coaching schools are a very strong homogenising force and the coaching culture has now become the accepted culture of schools in Classes 6-12. This is the social reality.

How do you contemplate change in the face of such an entrenched and established position? Can a more moderate filtering process for prestigious entrance examinations be thought of one that would be fair and also seen to be equitable to all? This is the question that demands a collective answer.

The dNEP advocates that the board examinations should henceforth focus on a few core concepts and test higher order skills.

The IIT tests do assess conceptual clarity and higher order skills. However, they call for repeated practice to reduce the time taken to answer questions, with speed being one of the criteria for success in the entrance exams. They are also extensive in that subject areas cover almost all of the first year BSc courses.

Suppose, as the dNEP suggests, one were to reduce the content in Class 12 for science and mathematics so that it does not resemble a college course. Let us accept that the questions will be pitched at a level similar to what it is today, but will call for the student to master much less of course content. What will happen? We are likely to find that those who cross the line in the entrance exams will constitute the top 15-20% which will be a huge number and much more than the number of seats available in the prestigious set of institutes.

If in this large number we stick to the idea of holistic development, no early specialisation, large array of inclinations and a student pool of diverse cultural backgrounds, it would be inappropriate to actually rank and segregate students among this set. There should actually be no selection of their

branch of study at this stage as there would be no ranks. They would have all crossed the accepted line in assessment of “conceptual clarity, critical thinking and analysis” as the dNEP advises.

Lottery Process

What does one do now? Since students in this set are all equally capable of studying at an IIT, we should leave the final selection to a lottery process. You are good and if you are lucky you get selected. This was suggested by a small group of HSTP resource persons many years ago but no one listened. This is not an irrational idea. It is based on the understanding that there are limits to the validity of the entrance tests. There would be a set of students who are successful in these tests, among whom one should be indifferent in selecting a smaller group.

Why is this idea appealing? Because for social reasons it would promote a different attitude towards the importance of liberal ideas of learning. The coaching industry is premised on dealing with the process of selection by insisting on clarity, speed and recall of a very extensive course. Together with this, is a brand building of departments and ranks by the market. If we remove these elements from the process then the reason for the coaching schools’ business would be somewhat limited. It would, of course, not go away completely.

In the system we are suggesting, many students without the aid of coaching would also cross the line and be declared eligible. If this happens it would set up a counter cycle of emphasising normal dedicated teaching at schools rather than the dummy schools of today. Not a magic wand but a possible counter position in the market process of selling dreams.

This alternative approach would help students immensely. The coaching industry rewards a few but for lakhs of students who do not succeed it labels them as failures and leaves them with a stigma that lasts a long time. The approach we are suggesting would not greatly demotivate those eligible candidates who were not lucky in the random selection process. They are likely to try other avenues with confidence. A large number of students who are in the proximal zone -- just below the line -- could hope to try another round. They might find solace with peers who were among the unlucky lot. It could all add up to reducing the unnecessary hype around this coveted path.

What could immensely aid such a process is for the IITs to expand their intake and courses at the master’s level. This way they would offer many of the bright BSc students (who may have been unlucky not to make it to the IITs at the bachelor’s level) another opportunity, after their graduation, to seek admission to the prestigious institutes.

The IITs themselves would be able to reach out to the large pool of undergraduate science colleges all over the country. This would encourage a progressive pedagogy and provide a guideline for the colleges in remote areas. This chain reaction will have an impact on the state boards. Since the numbers applying at this level would be far fewer than those who apply for admission right after school, hands on science and practical work should be part of the testing, not just a paper and pencil test. The ripple effect of this on teaching of science would also be far reaching.

In the long run, unless we upgrade regional colleges, find ways to attract talent to these colleges, provide them with research facilities and the opportunity to interact with other institutions, we would not be able to strengthen the base. Why cannot the IITs mentor a set of regional colleges, direct some of their ex-students to these institutes on fellowships and establish a genuine appetite for new ideas, research, and start-ups? The celebration today is of admission created by the market. If these changes are put in place, teachers and administrators in regional colleges then would have a different vision and not left to decay.

Change the Right Template First

Let us go back to the first observation that the change in the template for board examinations should begin with a change in template for the entrance examinations to the elite higher education institutions. First, the course content requirement needs to be reduced. Second, the emphasis in testing should be on conceptual understanding, creativity and expression. The changes in board examinations would then follow.

The dNEP suggests ideals that would see a reduction in content, place more emphasis on the process of learning, holistic development and do not push students in a dehumanizing manner.

Will the eminent members of the NEP committee speak with the group of IIT professors who set and monitor their entrance examination template to change the system of assessment, all in the larger cause of society? Those who are in charge of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) entrance exams could likewise engage in a similar discussion. They could set different goals and yet be able to attract talent and maintain their position of excellence. This is the real social marker -- the driving force that indirectly determines the school curriculum and classroom culture. It is not the various board examinations or NCERT that determine what should be taught and how. If the entrance processes were to first change, the board examinations would follow and change their system of assessment. This may be a route for macro change in assessment that would have an immense impact on the culture of schools and teachers.

(Thanks to Rashmi Paliwal for her suggestions.)

Arvind Sardana, Social Science Group, Ekivaya, Madhya Pradesh