

A Race to the Bottom

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<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/cbse-board-exam-results-indian-education-system-shobhit-mahajan-6518864/>

“Lucknow girl scores 100% marks in Class XII” is the headline. The news item goes on to say that Divyanshi Jain scored 100% marks in all the 5 humanities subjects that she appeared in and was given 100% marks in her Geography exam which was cancelled due to the ongoing public health emergency. Another news item is about a pair of identical twins scoring exactly the same marks in each of the subjects that they took the exams in. When it comes to newsworthiness, declaration of CBSE results can compete with events like the onset of the Southwest monsoon, the budget and a stock market collapse.

This time of the year is nerve racking for lakhs of students and their families- the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) declares its Class XII and Class X results. A person’s performance in these two examinations has become a benchmark for their academic competence. For lakhs of students, success or failure in these exams is the key determinant of their self-worth.

The nation-wide exams conducted by the CBSE are a mammoth task in logistics and planning. More than 30 lakh students from across the country appear for these examinations. To reduce the risk of paper leakage, many sets of encrypted question papers are sent to the examination centers including some in very remote areas. The range of subjects is mindboggling- in 2018, a student could choose from 800 subjects ranging from the mundane Physics, Economics etc. to esoteric ones like Olericulture and Confectionary. The fact that the whole process is completed year after year, without any major glitches is a testament to the organizational abilities of CBSE.

The logistical and organizational competencies of the organization unfortunately are rarely visible in what is possibly the most important aspect of the exercise- academic soundness of the learning and evaluation process. Indeed, one can argue that the *raison d’etre* for the existence of the Board is to ensure high academic standards in teaching of students and their evaluation. It is here that it has not delivered.

An essential part of the learning process is the syllabus in any subject- what is to be taught and to what degree of detail. This is usually done by teachers and researchers, the experts so to say, who are aware of the topics which need to be included, the sequencing and their relative importance. This then gets translated into textbooks usually written by another set of experts commissioned by NCERT. These textbooks are by and large comprehensive and of good quality.

The issue is then really of the evaluation process and its feedback effects on the learning process. If the students and the teachers know that evaluation demands a certain kind of pedagogy and methodology, then there is enough incentive for them to adopt the same. And there are many ways in which this feedback works. For instance, the Class XII board exam tests material which is taught only in Class XII instead of material which has been taught in both classes XI and XII. The syllabus for instance, in Physics is therefore divided into what is taught in Class XI and that which is to be taught in Class XII. But since the evaluation is only on the basis of what is taught in Class XII, the topics to be covered in Class XI receive a short shrift from teachers and students.

It actually gets much worse- CBSE, in its desire to do “maximum good to the maximum number” has ensured that the Class XII syllabus, at least in Physics, contains the relatively easier topics while the more challenging concepts are left for Class XI. The effect of this on the assimilation and understanding of the subject can only be imagined.

The evaluation process thus determines the learning outcomes. However, the evaluation process seems to have only one overarching goal- to ensure that maximum students pass and what is more, a large number of them score very high marks. This is ensured by an innocuously named system called “moderation”. The question papers are moderated to ensure that they are not too challenging. And if by any chance, a reasonable question paper which actually tests conceptual understanding of the student gets through this rigorous exercise, all hell breaks loose. Our country must be the only democratic country where the Members of Parliament can be exercised over a “tough” mathematics paper for Class XII!

The results show how generous CBSE is with giving marks. Every year the pass percentage increases, the number of students getting above 95% increases as do the number getting a full 100%. This turns the whole evaluation to a farce. Evaluation of students is meant to test their understanding of the subject, their power of critical

thinking and ability to assimilate concepts of a subject. Thus the marks are supposed to provide an honest benchmark for an outsider to gauge the student's appropriateness for a job, for further academic work etc. Unfortunately this doesn't happen when it is obvious to outsiders that the marks are not a reflection of the student's abilities- either by themselves or in a comparative sense. Most self-respecting institutions of higher learning don't trust these marks and thus have their own tests. Academics lament the weak foundations of the students' learning. And industry captains frequently complain about the lack of analytical skills in the same students after their college degrees.

Dictators in many countries are known to rig elections- anything less than a 99% vote in their favor is unacceptable. But even they do not make it 100% so as to be able to claim that they were "free and fair". Inflating marks might make the parents, the students and the politicians feel good. But this race to the "top" is really a race to the bottom which will have long term consequences. The CBSE needs to rethink its populist approach to evaluation and bring a system which encourages actual learning. This is essential if we want to be a player in tomorrow's knowledge economy.

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