



# WRONG LESSONS FROM EXPERTS

Fifteen years of working on education issues in India teaches one to be patient. This is a field with a great many experts. These experts are committed, knowledgeable, well-intentioned and used to speaking with authority. They are, perhaps understandably, a little impatient with upstarts who start talking about data and evidence and even sometimes implementing large-scale interventions to fix things, without necessarily having spent decades immersed in educational theory. “Those who talk about reading do not know how to read themselves,” one of those experts told one such upstart one day some years ago. That would put you in place.

Patience is critical because the experts have great deal of influence on educational policy. They designed the Right to Education (RTE) Bill to achieve their dream of a high quality education for every child. We share the same dream, but we were not invited to participate in the conversation and indeed the “Right” that we now have seems to embody a very specific view of education quality, one that seems more grounded in urban Delhi than in the villages in Bihar, Rajasthan or UP where we work. Do we really believe that the priorities of poor Indian parents are schools that have playgrounds, and teachers who have the right certificates? Why have they been deserting the government schools en masse over the last decade despite the fact that these schools typically have both certified teachers and playgrounds? The private schools they end up in are often housed in somebody’s extra bedrooms, and the teacher does not always have all the requisite certificates, but as the parents keep repeating, at least he comes to work and puts some effort into teaching. We certainly do not believe that private schooling alone will solve all our educational problems, but think of how the parents would feel if their children’s school closed down because it does not meet the requirements set down in the Act?

It is probably time now to stop being patient. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) recently released by Pratham confirms a worrying trend that was first noticed last year. Based on data from testing 448,545 children (ages 5 to 16) who live in 16,166 villages spread across 567 districts (almost all of India), it is clear that the share of Indian children who can do very basic mathematics and read simple paragraphs is falling sharply, too sharply to be explained by the fact that more children are coming into the system. There are few success stories here and there, but the basic picture is grim.

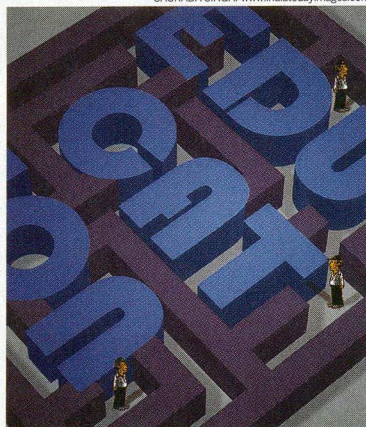
Yet the expert reaction (as captured by the article by Vinod Raina, one of the architects of the RTE, in *INDIA TODAY*, “Tests are Torture”, February 4), astoundingly, is to blame the test. The child has fever. Break the thermometer! The thermometer stresses the child out and that must be what gives him fever! “Tests are torture,” Mr Raina says.

There is a basic confusion in the article, between testing and incentives based on test scores. ASER is a way for the nation to know where it stands. Its message is not about the children failing—no child is told how she did—it is about the nation failing its children. Per se, such testing will indeed do very little. All it can do is to motivate everyone, at all levels, to try and do better.

Since testing is the main problem, there is really no crisis in Raina’s world, or at least no new crisis. Things were bad in 1986 and they are still bad. Consistent with that view, Raina’s recommendations sound like they could have been (and indeed were, on multiple occasions) scripted by an education department official any time in the last three decades: Put more money into the state schools; hire more teachers (but not contract teachers); more teacher trainings; and please don’t let private schools take over. Read together, they make very clear where it is all coming from: Vinod Raina’s primary constituency is teachers rather than students—he is willing to fight anything that threatens teachers’ status and pay. That’s the real reason why he and so many other established experts have always been uncomfortable with ASER and public exams in general, why the Right to Education comes with no right to find out whether the education in fact is being delivered. Tests

expose the teachers—illiterate parents find out that their children are failing. Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation will fix all that, since most of these parents will not know what to make of them.

Now, teachers are of course important. They are key to the success of any educational effort. But the school system must be designed for children, not for teachers, not for those who train teachers, not for those who make curricula and write textbooks. Whatever helps children learn and parents able to force schools to deliver has to get priority. Until experts agree to this or policymakers agree to politely sideline the experts, maybe we can indeed stop testing. No improvements are likely.



SAURABH SINGH/www.indiatodayimages.com

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*Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo are the co-authors of Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*