How to fix accountability in school education

For some time now, accountability has become the buzzword in school education. Everyone seems to have suggestions about "fixing" education by holding teachers accountable for student test scores. But we should ask ourselves whether test scores are the only way to assess how well education systems are performing; whether teachers are the only ones to blame for low-performing systems; and whether 'blame' itself is the right approach at all.

UNESCO's new Global Education Monitoring Report 2017/18 is a comprehensive and nuanced look at the role of accountability in global education systems in the effort to achieve the vision of the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: to ensure inclusive and quality education for all, and to promote lifelong learning.

The report points out that providing universal quality education depends not on the performance of teachers alone, but is the shared responsibility of several stakeholders: governments, schools, teachers, parents, the media and civil society, international organisations, and the private sector. It does indeed take an entire village.

Teachers, doing a complex and difficult job against many odds, are only one rung in the complex chain that makes up the education system. Hence it is both unfair and short-sighted to turn every discussion of the performance of education systems into a blame game and fix responsibility only on teachers, disproportionately, for poor test scores and absenteeism. Using poor test scores to punish teachers is a bad idea for many reasons, including the risk that it might result in teachers simply teaching 'to the test'. Teaching to the test is never a good way forward for any education system: examination scores by themselves are an inadequate way of assessing the complex process of teaching and learning. Not only does an exclusive focus on test scores have the risk of leaving weaker students behind, it also leaves academically better-performing students with a narrow understanding of what education is all about.

Don't blame teachers

As for teacher absence, very often the reasons for this are beyond the teachers' own control. It is unfair to hold them responsible for factors that are not in their hands. For example, nearly half of teacher absenteeism in Indonesia in one year was due to excused time for study, during which substitutes should have been provided.

In this context one recalls an important study of teacher absenteeism in 619 schools across six States carried out by the Azim Premji Foundation. It found that while the overall percentage of teachers not in school was 18.5%, most of these were either out of school on other official duty, or on bonafide leave. Actual teacher absenteeism because of teachers' truancy was 2.5%.

If the larger problem is of teacher shortages, perhaps it is time to talk of accountability with a constructive focus on the role of each stakeholder in the education system. How can we better fund and resource schools and colleges? How can we better train and support our teachers? How can we help communities to ensure that every child is in school? How can we support parents, so many of whom never went to school themselves, in helping their children learn?

Accountability mechanisms should be developed for education systems that are supportive, constructive and focus as much on the fundamental issues of access, equity and inclusion as on quality.

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personal

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust