

Break down the wall between know-what and know-how

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Why do you send your children to school? Why do you want to educate them?" I asked. The answer was the same in villages and small towns, as I travelled through Karnaprayag and Rudraprayag, up in the Garhwal mountains, to Surguja and Jashpur Nagar in eastern Chhattisgarh, to Chamarajanagar in southern Karnataka. And it has been the same answer for years. The answer has three parts. One, without education today there is no respect. Two, education is essential for dealing with the world of today. Three, education is necessary for good employment. These expectations of the average person are directly related to the aims of education and our curricular goals, as committed to in our policies.

There is no doubt that much as our education system is failing to deliver basic learning outcomes, it's also falling short of the other aims, including its economic ones.

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Its inadequacies have a role in the high rates of youth under-employment and unemployment. A larger share of the blame may be placed on the lack of creation of an adequate number of good jobs and livelihood opportunities, but surely our school and higher education systems are also part of the problem.

Fundamental failures of quality and equity in our education system have deep and broad effects on all matters, including on access to jobs and employment trajectories. However, there are two particular characteristics of our education system and its approach that have an even more direct bearing on the issue of employment and livelihoods.

First, like much of our society, education accords a higher status to capacities that have to do with thinking: 'working with the head.' It grants a much lower status to anything to do with doing: 'working with the hand.' This is apparent not only in how 'vocational education' has low status vis-a-vis 'academic education', but also within academic education itself. 'Practicals' in science, as they are called in Indian schools and colleges, have ludicrously low weights in assessment. Even in engineering colleges, the greater emphasis is on sitting and writing, rather than doing. Second, this approach leads to little or no attention to the development of capacities for doing things, often termed 'skills'. Skills range from working with your hands on various things, dealing with people, communication, and more.

All this has multiple implications. At a very basic level, it creates an artificial separation between knowledge and skills. Whereas in reality 'know-what' and 'know-how' are inextricably linked; the head and hand (and actually heart too) have to work in tandem for effectiveness. A sharp separation of our vocational and academic education systems is another implication. This separation has been amplified manifold in the past couple of decades as an entire 'skills training' system has emerged.

We have created two stunted and inadequate systems. We have an academic education system that ignores 'know-how' and we also have a skills-training and vocational education system that is shallow in the absence of 'know-what'. In the process, we have reinforced social stigma and deepened inequalities between those who can access an academic education and those that are forced into vocational education and skills training. This is the design of our systems itself—leave aside the matter of the quality of outcomes.

There is some reason for hope. The National Education Policy 2020 will address many of these issues when it is implemented. First, it ensures that the aims of education value 'headwork' as much as 'handwork', and it does so by recognizing that 'know-how' and 'know-what' cannot be separated. Second, it demolishes the separation between academic education, vocational education, and the skills training system. It achieves this by integrating all these aspects within education—right from school up to higher education. Third, it embeds many subtle elements. For example, ensuring that all children have vocational education courses, not only those who can't make it in the academic world; this helps break down the hierarchy between doing and thinking. Ensuring that 'vocational education' and 'skills training' are offered as an integral part of the curricula in the most prestigious of higher education institutions. The pedagogical approach to connect all subject content being learnt to the world around the student will also have profound implications. There are more.

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Addressing the inadequacies of systems will help develop individuals who have what it takes to make the transition from school to work and be adaptable to rapidly changing labour markets. But this is merely one part of the equation. The bigger part is ensuring that the economy generates enough good jobs.

For this, there is a need to prioritize good job creation; even a substantially improved education system—which integrates know-how and know-what—will not lead to the positive long-term economic trajectories for our young.

There is an urgent need for a national strategy for job creation that is rooted in the reality of our country and fully accounts for global economic and technological shifts. Good education is a necessary condition for economic well-being—good and growing jobs—but it is by no means a sufficient condition.

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