

# School education in an uncertain world

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Very few people can get me to do something that I don't want to. My daughter can get me to do anything. She made me watch the movie *The Hunger Games*. That movie dredged out an imaginary world from the depths of my memory.

Imagine a world where everyone's livelihood depends on success in some sport. Everyone can learn and train till they are 18. Then they have to choose to play some sport. But 99% do not get to play the sport they choose, they play a sport that is willing to accept them. The sports range from cricket to sumo wrestling, and beyond. An individual plays the sport for a few years and then has to start playing another one. New sports can be invented by the masters of this universe at any time. You will have to play them when asked.

Here is the all-important question: What will you train for in those first 18 years? To state the obvious: you have no clue what you will play, for how long, and what after that. And this is about your livelihood, the highest possible stakes.

It was a detailed fantasy. I thought about the training. With that kind of uncertainty, it would be important to develop and train for a full range of basic capacities. Strength of every muscle and flexibility of every part would be the foundation. On that, stamina would have to be built. Then it would be about the balance and coordination of all bodily parts. To that, many kinetic capacities would have to be added: Run long, run fast, jump high and jump long.

Since I had spent many an idle hour on this, I can go on. But let me stop with a few illustrations of other categories of capacities. It seemed clear that a tolerance to pain and extreme conditions would be important. As would social capacities of communicating and working with others. And personal characteristics such as confidence and resilience. Perhaps even a sound ethical sense. It is only this kind of development of basic capacities that could enable a reasonable chance of a decent life in such a world.

We have something almost identical in our real world. There is enormous uncertainty about jobs and livelihoods. Growth in itself is not leading to expansion of livelihood opportunities. Occupations and trades are changing. The nature of work itself is changing. Land use changes, globalization, technology and capital intensity are driving structural changes in the economy and for the labour force. Artificial intelligence, machine learning and robots will have substantial effects.

Even the most optimistic, who believe (almost as an article of faith) that somehow human ingenuity will ensure we continue to prosper economically, agree that individuals face very uncertain economic futures. And that to be successful they will have to be flexible, adapt, learn and relearn quickly, and change occupations many times over their lifetime.

This is much like my imaginary world of sports. And so, much like in my imaginary world, the all-important question is, how can individuals be prepared for this uncertain future?

School education is the societal, institutional mechanism which helps our young develop. So, this question is especially relevant for school education. The aims of education are not limited to preparing people for jobs and livelihood, it has much wider and deeper social and human aims, and is the foundation of a democratic society. But this piece will be limited to the economic aims of education.

In the face of this uncertainty, much like in the imaginary world of sports, the most effective approach will be for school education to focus on developing the basic and fundamental capacities of students. In fact, nothing else will work. These capacities include thinking critically, reasoning, analysing, problem-solving and synthesis. Language and communication will be equally important. As would be working with others, human sensitivity and related social capacities. Knowledge of the basics of "subjects", such as math, physical sciences and social sciences, and their relevance would be critical. Working with your hands and dealing with physical material would be important. As would be development of a work ethic, being constructive, and a sound moral sense. This is a sufficient, but not a complete, list.

High-capacity teachers, an empowering school culture and an enabling curriculum will be needed to make this happen. Since I have written frequently about teachers, their capacity and how that can be developed and supported, let me just make a brief comment on the curriculum.

The curriculum must be focused on developing these capacities, with relevant learning goals. This must be in practice, not only in its abstract articulation, which may already be there. We need to move away from content-heavy to content-rich curriculum, carefully chosen for depth and its wider implications. And the content should be used to develop these capacities rather than focusing on the memorization of content. There must be a deliberate connection of all learning to life. Physical development and work, using the world around, would be necessary. Since textbooks dominate the reality of the practice of the curriculum, these need to be changed and improved.

Complex as all this is, it is the only way to deal with the uncertainty of livelihoods. Skilling programmes and vocational training cannot substitute for this basic developmental effect of sound school education. To fulfil India's economic potential and enable economic well-being for individuals, our schools must do this. Else, there is a possibility of real hunger games playing out in India.

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