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Skills Education and Workforce Preparation: Examining the Disconnects between Policy Intentions and Outcomes in India

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Abstract

Investments in education and training have been considered critical to human capital formation and economic productivity of nations (Ashton et al., 1999). However, globally the nature of investments in education have been changing, with 'skills formation' having come to be accepted as one of the key drivers of the economy (Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Nikson, et al., 2003). Skills education is considered critical to the inclusion of the poor and the marginalised into the economy (Gibb and Walker, 2011) and for moving workers from conditions of informality to formality, especially in the context of poor and developing countries (World Bank, 2008). Thus, in the last two decades, over 120 countries have rushed to align their education systems with the requirements of the economy for a 'skilled workforce', by developing narrowly defined competency-based frameworks recognised as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Allais, 2014).

The paper reviews these trends in the context of India. Based on a qualitative study analysing the new skills policy and NQF, it presents the disconnects seen between stated policy intentions and actual outcomes on marginalised youth, which seem to reinforce rather than narrow the existing class differences through education. Through this, the paper tries to highlight the paradox of education focused on skill development - that is, its imagined role in ensuring inclusive and equitable development on the one hand, and of creating a global supply chain of cheap labour for corporations, on the other.

Keywords: skills, education, workforce preparation, industry-oriented, exclusion

Introduction

Since the 1980s, education has come to be seen as central to economic planning (Ashton et al, 1999). Based on Human Capital theories, development agencies (such as the World Bank, UN and DfID), have pushed for enhanced investments on education, as it is believed to improve labour market outcomes, and thereby reduce poverty and increase economic growth (Brown & Lauder, 2010;King, 2007; King, McGrath & Rose, 2007; McGrath, 2010).

While primary education received much of the attention between 1980s-1990s (ColClough & De, 2010; King, 2007; King, McGrath & Rose, 2007), this focus has changed in the last decade. With the rate of return to basic education having declined, partially due to the trade-offs that have been made in ensuring quantitative expansion of primary education systems, over quality (King, McGrath & Rose, 2007), the emphasis has shifted once more towards post-basic education, specifically on "skills" for employment and work (King, McGrath & Rose, 2007; Taylor, 1998).

This shift towards 'skilling' has also accompanied changes within the economy in the last several decades that have resulted in new contexts of work. Technological advancements made in the last several decades have allowed for more distributed and flexible operations of firms. Globally firms seeking cheap labour available elsewhere, now require a skilled and adaptable workforce, trained to fit into these new contexts of work (Brown & Lauder, 2010). New work conditions, brought by the technological revolution, has also shifted the nature of work from assembly line modes of production, to production premised upon 'knowledge work', requiring innovation and creativity at the higher ends, and back office processes using advanced technologies, at lower ends of the production chain (Brown & Lauder, 2010).

While these changes do necessitate a change in the orientation of education and training systems, what is particularly noteworthy is the consensus that has emerged among educators and employers alike regarding the particular relevance of skills-based education in addressing these needs. 'Skills', recognised as the "learned abilities to do something well" (University of Waterloo Career Services, n.d.; as cited in Urciuoli, 2008, p.211), and considered to be measurable competences, have received preferential attention among educators, donors and governments alike, as they are seen to more demonstrably present the outcomes of learning and investments on training (Johnson, 1998; Levesque, 2011; Urciuoli, 2008). Similarly, they are preferred by employers who are more clearly able to see the specific competences held by employees, while also allowing them to play an influential part in shaping educational policies by specifying the desired outcomes that can make education systems more closely aligned with the world of work (Allais, 2014).

The shift towards flexibly acquirable skills-based education and training structures and outcome-based qualification frameworks has also been thought to afford learners greater control- by providing them with options to gain further qualifications through short-term, modular and on-

demand training, thereby creating conditions for mobility and inclusion for even those who may otherwise not be able to access higher education (Allais, 2014; Young, 2013). As a result, skills based education systems and concomitant outcome-based qualification frameworks have been adopted by over 120 countries (Allais, 2014). However, this has led to a further narrowing of the goals for education in the service of the new economy, something that remains unnoticed in the discourse on skill-based education.

This trend has been noted even for India, which has recently jumped on to the bandwagon of skilling. India also introduced an outcome-based National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) in 2014, under which all types of educational opportunities available in the country (i.e., general, technical and vocational streams; long-term as well as short-term courses) have been subsumed and linked. With India recognised as both, having a 'demographic dividend' (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India, 2015; Khare, 2016; King, 2012),[1] and cheap labour (Brown & Lauder, 2010), the government has undertaken urgent efforts to harness this population through the adoption of massive targets for skilling.

However, this demographic dividend also poses certain challenges for India, mainly since the majority population in India still remains outside the purview of formal education and training (Khare, 2016; Pilz, 2016). Further, the education system has also been noted to do little in terms of preparing students for work due to poor linkages between general and vocational education, and between education and employment in general (Pilz, 2016). Against this context, the Government of India (henceforth GoI) put in place the National Policy on Skill Development (NSDP) in 2009, which was modified and re-launched as the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (NPSDE) in 2015.[2] Few studies have undertaken a critical review of the policies and their outcomes since its launch. The studies that are available mainly use *secondary data* and have primarily reviewed the scope of the policy in addressing the demographic dividend; its fit with demands for a skilled workforce; and how it addresses concerns of equity, access and mobility for all (e.g., refer Aring, 2012; Bajar, 2016; King, 2012; Saraf, 2016; Sadagopal, 2016).

In contrast with these studies, the paper presents *one of the first primary researches* on the impact of the skills policy. Based on preliminary ethnographic research it highlights the contradictions between policy intentions of educational inclusion, and how this plays out on the field by largely favouring corporate interests. These disconnects between policy intentions and ground-level implications are discussed further in the following sections, after presenting the methodology, and details of the educational context of India against which the policies should be

[1] i.e., India is set to have a growing working age population between 15-59 years in the coming decades, as opposed to a growing aging population elsewhere

examined. The paper then concludes by pointing out to certain important implications for skill development policies and programmes for the country.

Methodology

The paper is based on a six month ethnographic study of skills training programmes undertaken post implementation of the two national policies on skills development. Primary research for the study, undertaken between June-November 2016, was conducted in Bangalore, through visits to state departments of labour and education, and schools, colleges and training institutions affiliated with them. Observations within schools and other institutional contexts (e.g., polytechnic colleges, Industrial Training Institutes [ITI], private skills programmes) was combined with interviews with key stakeholders, including officials of the Department of Labour and Education; and Head Masters, teachers, and skills trainers from private training firms. In addition, Focus Group Discussions were also conducted with students from government schools, ITIs and polytechnics in order to understand their perspectives and aspirations vis-à-vis the provisions made in the policies.

Table 1: Details of fieldwork undertaken

Fieldwork Sites	No.
No. of Government schools offering Vocation Education visited	4
No. of Industrial Training Institutes visited	2
Polytechnics visited	1
Vocational Training Partner Institutes visited	2
Government Departments Visited	2
Interviews conducted with Government officials	3
Interviews conducted with trainers	8
Interviews conducted with VTP officials	2
FGDs with school students	3
Interviews conducted with School Headmasters	2

Ethnography was used as it allowed for a "...study [of] people's actions and accounts in everyday contexts in a fairly unstructured manner, over an extended period of time (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; as cited in Maithreyi, 2015, p.48),[3] thus allowing also for an examination of the empirical linkages between trans-local frameworks of policy and educational administration and people's everyday actions within local settings of schools, colleges and labour markets (DeVault and McCoy, 2006). This was critical as this is what allowed us to see the social and material aspects of policy - that is how policy directives played out on field, in relation to the structural contexts within which these policies were implemented (e.g., globalisation; economic and educational conditions and structures within the Indian context).

Further, we used discourse analysis in the treatment of data (secondary as well as primary), in order to understand the "...'interests, discontinuities, omissions, compromises, and exceptions' (Ball 1990, p.3)" (as cited in Gibb & Walker, 2011), created in the process of policy making and policy implementation. This, rather than an analytic framework that examined the policies in terms of whether they 'succeeded' or 'failed' in relation to their objectives, allowed us to further see how policies are not neutral and apolitical instruments, but are in fact related to specific social contexts, economics and politics (Ball, 1990; Gibb & Walker, 2011; Whitty, 2002)

In doing this, we analyse field data alongside policy texts and economic plans for skilling. By engaging with the different actors who are involved with the skilling programmes alongside policy texts, we were able to get a sense of not only the complexities inherent within the policy space, but were able to deconstruct policy texts based on their interpretations and applications on the field.

The Educational Context in India (A Background to the Skills Policy)

The GoI has put forth an ambitious plan of skilling 500 million individuals by 2022, thereby increasing the pool of formally skilled workforce from two to 50 per cent (King, 2012). This needs to be seen in relation to the existing educational scenario within the country. India's mainstream education system is organised as 10+2+3 system, consisting of 10 years of basic (elementary plus secondary) schooling, two years of higher secondary schooling and three years of graduation (i.e., a bachelor's degree, or alternatively five years of professional education such as medical or engineering). In reality, the educational scenario in the country is far more complex with variations

[3]By 'unstructured', Hammersly and Atkinson (2007) refer, both, to the flexibility allowed in research design, as well as in the categories used for interpretation of data, which can undergo a process of recursive and reflexive reformulation as the research proceeds.

emerging as a result of the multiplicity of educational providers (i.e., state, private and non-governmental), and regulators (i.e., central, state, private and international educational boards recognised by the government) at all levels. This has created a scenario wherein the quality and content of education available at any level is highly variable.

This highly diverse set of options for education in the country is further complicated by the history of colonialism and casteism, and post- Independence politics in educational policy making, that has historically favoured elite, upper caste (men) to receive education, creating a legacy of exclusion that the nation is still struggling to reverse (Maithreyi, forthcoming; K. Kumar, 1988; 2004; Seth, 2007). This history of exclusion manifests in the present, in at least two ways -

a. as differential opportunities of access to schooling available to different sections of society, with over 35 per cent of the school age population between 6-14 years still out-of-school (Maithreyi et al., 2016; NEUPA, 2015-16). This is despite the passage of the Right to Education Act (2009) by the state, which legally guarantees every child the right to free and compulsory schooling (Ministry of Law and Justice, GoI, 2009);

b. as differences in quality of education received by different groups, with a small, elite section of society with the purchasing power, receiving higher quality, English medium education in private/international schools; while lower caste and class children continue to depend on 'free' government schools, that have become the last resort for even the most marginalised sections of the population (De, Noronha & Samson, 2002-03)

These inequalities further widen at the post-primary and higher education levels, which is still largely privatised (Prakash, 2011). Thus, only about 20 per cent of the eligible population is currently enrolled/able to access higher education (Khare, 2016). These large numbers of population out-of-school, or with just basic education has meant that large sections of the eligible workforce is not adequately trained for employment.[4]

In order to address this scenario, the GoI, even as early as the 1950s, launched a parallel system of vocational training, and vocational education in the 1980s. Vocational training is offered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) through Industrial training Institutes (ITIs). ITIs provide training opportunities for school drop-outs or youth with basic education (i.e., up to class 10) in 70 engineering related and 63 non-engineering related trades (K. Kumar, 2016). However, ITIs are plagued by several issues of quality ranging from outdated infrastructure and

[4]An added concern is also that even with access to higher education, graduates are often not trained for the world of work, thus entailing considerable retraining on the job (Khare, 2016).

curriculum to poor quality of training staff, resulting in poor employability for students (K. Kumar, 2011; World Bank, 2008). In addition, since 2007, the government's plans to increase the capacity of the vocational training sector, in keeping with the demand for skilled labour, has resulted in an expansion of private ITIs that have been noted to offer poorer quality training when compared to government ITIs at higher costs for students (Mehrotra & Saxena, 2014). All these factors, along with the fact that it allows no mobility for students to return to mainstream education, has made vocational training in the country unattractive and non-aspirational (K. Kumar, 2011).

Vocational education was also started with similar intentions of providing opportunities with limited means to access higher education (Gupta, Raman & Krisanthan, 2016). Vocational courses were made available in fields of engineering and technology, library sciences, beauty and applied arts and craft, at the higher secondary level (Singh, 2013). However, just four per cent of the eligible population opts for these courses (Gupta, Raman & Krisanthan, 2016). Vocational education in India has also not been aligned to labour market requirements, has failed to guarantee employment to students and lacks funds and private sector participation in planning (Gupta, Raman & Krisanthan, 2016; World Bank, 2008).

It is against this context that the national policies on skills development were launched in an effort to better link education with the world of work, and to prepare a skilled workforce on par with international standards. A new ministry of Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) was set-up in 2015, with the primary objectives of " ...meet[ing] the challenge of skilling at scale with speed, standard (quality) and sustainability", as well as for providing "... an umbrella framework to all skilling activities being carried out within the country, to align them to common standards and link skilling with demand centres" (MSDE, GOI, 2015, p. 3). The new skills agenda (as envisaged through the skills policy) builds on the existing infrastructure for skilling, through plans laid down to expand the existing capacity of vocational training and education. In addition to infrastructural expansions, introduction of several short-term, modular courses, and allocation of up to Rs. 170 billion for skilling (The Economic Times, February 03, 2017), the new policy has also introduced certain important changes to the skilling landscape and to the organisation and administration of (skills) education in the country.

One change brought by the new skills policy has been the involvement of private sector more fundamentally within the space of education and training. Private sector involvement has been enabled through the setting up of the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC) - a public-private partnership between the central government and private industry bodies, which has subsequently been converted into a for-profit private limited company (MSDE, GoI, 2015; NSDC, 2015). The NSDC (which was set-up with government funding to the tune of Rs. 9.95 billion) and

its affiliates, known as Sector Skill Councils (SSCs - trade bodies for different sectors of trade) have been given the responsibility for developing curriculum, certifying private skills training providers (SKPs), and for setting up the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for evaluating graduates from various government and non-government institutions that have received skilling (MSDE, GoI, 2015).

Another key change introduced through the skills policy (NPSDE 2015) has been the extension of the vocational education programmes downwards to secondary school (i.e., for classes 9 and 10; henceforth referred to as 'Vocationalisation of Secondary Education [VSE]) (Gupta, Raman and Krisanthan, 2016). One of the primary aims of this move has been to better integrate the different streams of education - general, vocational and higher education (Ministry of Human Resources Development [MHRD}, GoI, 2014). VSE has been introduced in 20,000 government schools (Singh, 2012), and training within these schools is to be provided by NSDC recognised SKPs. A separate flexible pool of funds of Rs 1.45 million has been allocated per school for the appointment of SKPs. Skills education under VSE is divided into four levels (one level each to be completed from class 9 to 12), which is supposed to also be integrated and linked upwards with vocational/diploma/ general education programmes at the college level (MHRD, GoI, 2014).

The upward and downward linkages between school education and higher education, as well as between general and mainstream education is the third critical change that has been enabled by the new skills policy, through the introduction of a common qualifications framework, known as the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF). The government notification on the NSQF states that it is a "nationally integrated education and competency based skill framework" that provides for vertical and horizontal pathways between vocational education, vocational training, general education and technical education, and also has provisions to recognise 'prior learning' (Ministry of Finance, 2013).

The move to adopt an integrated national framework also marks India's efforts at making its system of education and training compatible with international practices and standards (Ministry of Finance, GoI, 2013). However, such seamless integration envisaged through policy frameworks is yet to be seen at least in the Indian context, with links between pre-vocational education and vocational education yet to be implemented (Singh, 2012). Similarly, mobility between the various streams of education is yet to be enabled as was evident from the preliminary ethnographic study conducted by us (Maithreyi et al., 2016). In fact, seamless linkages between vocational education introduced at the secondary and higher secondary levels is yet to be facilitated, and critical stakeholders (i.e., state level education department officials, students, parents, etc) are yet to be included in the planning and decision making processes related to these new programmes for skilling (Maithreyi et al., 2016). In the next section, we discuss these insights from the field in more

detail, showing how field-level observations showed divergences from policy intentions of offering inclusion, mobility and control to some stakeholders such as students and parents, but increased control for others such as employers and private sector industries.

Omissions and Commissions of Policy Planning: Notes from the Field

This section presents insights developed through the ethnographic study of the new skills policy initiatives, primarily relevant to the context of Karnataka.[5] While the new skills agenda is being operationalised through twenty plus ministries (King, 2012), we limited our focus to formal, long-term secondary and higher secondary educational opportunities (as opposed to short-term, modular courses), and thus to vocational programmes offered by the departments of labour and education. (The national ministries of Labour and Education have been allotted the second largest targets for skilling at the national level after MSDE [King, 2012]). Fieldwork across these programmes allowed us to observe certain exclusions that are being fostered through these long-term skilling programmes.

Here, we discuss four main processes through which these exclusions are being fostered-namely, a. the routing of select students away from mainstream education through introduction of vocational programmes in select schools; b. privileging industry targets for skilling over manpower needs, thereby limiting opportunities for vocational training for a sub-set of the cohort of students passing out of secondary education; c. making entry to skills training programmes contingent upon certain personal characteristics of students, desired by industry, thereby excluding others from opportunities for gaining vocational skills; and d. finally,the creation of additional modular options for skilling, to address the mismatch between industry requirements and quality of students passing out of the education system. This latter option makes it possible for only those with the economic resources to access additional forms of training. We discuss these four processes in more detail below.

a. Exclusion via introduction of vocational education in select schools - As noted earlier, the new skills policy has been extended to elementary education through VSE, in order to make skills development aspirational and integrate skilling with formal education (MSDE, GoI, 2015). The NPSDE has proposed to introduce vocational education in class 9 in 25 per cent of the schools in the country (MSDE, GoI, 2015). Within Karnataka, 100 schools have been selected for implementation of VSE in the first phase, starting from June 2014.

[5] Though insights from this study can also be drawn for the national context.

A perusal of the list of schools in which VSE would be available, shared by Karnataka state education department, showed that the programme was being implemented only within state government schools that, as mentioned earlier, have become the last and only resort for children from the poorest families with no means to access other forms of education. While the MHRD notification on the revision of the vocational education scheme, and its extension to secondary levels states that private aided schools (i.e., fee-charging schools that are privately owned and managed, but that receive grant-in-aid from the government, and are required to comply with several norms applicable to government schools) will also be incentivised to adopt these changes, no private aided school in Karnataka seems to have been selected at least during the first round of implementation.

The selective inclusion of government schools for VSE presents a disturbing trend of selection of students from backward communities to be routed out of mainstream education, through the introduction of vocational subject in the place of a mainstream subject.[6] This could, in the long-run, lead to a further consolidation of existing class-based differences within education. Vocational training and education, through ITIs and polytechnics, as discussed before, have largely been non-aspirational within the country as they prepare individuals mainly for shop-floor work and other low-end jobs. As Kumar (2011) has noted, it also replays the caste-based stigma associated with manual (even skilled work)and have been accessed by those with little or no resources to pursue higher education. Under these circumstances, introduction of vocationalisation in government schools alone seems to suggest that students from marginalised contexts are the ones who are being identified and pushed to take up these less valued forms of education, with lower returns and low status.

When seen alongside the Right to Education Act (2009) that only guarantees free and compulsory education up to class 8 (i.e., 14 years),[7] separate but interconnected policies appear to be creating structural conditions of exclusion - through lack of guarantees for the minimum ten years of basic education, as well as through early introduction of VSE for select students. The state's lack of commitment towards ten years of basic education on the one hand, and early introduction of VSE is reflective of the emerging global trends wherein education for employment is being favoured over general education, as discussed earlier. This is also indicative of structuring the educational system in ways that privilege and strengthen linkages with industry, thus privileging employers' interests over individual development.

[6] In the case of Karnataka, the vocational subject replaces a language subject, which could be important for competitive government exams and selections

[7] Although the Central Advisory Board of Education of the MHRD has proposed an extension of the Right to Education up to secondary schooling (or class 10) in its 58th Meeting and is still under consideration (Yagnik, 2016).

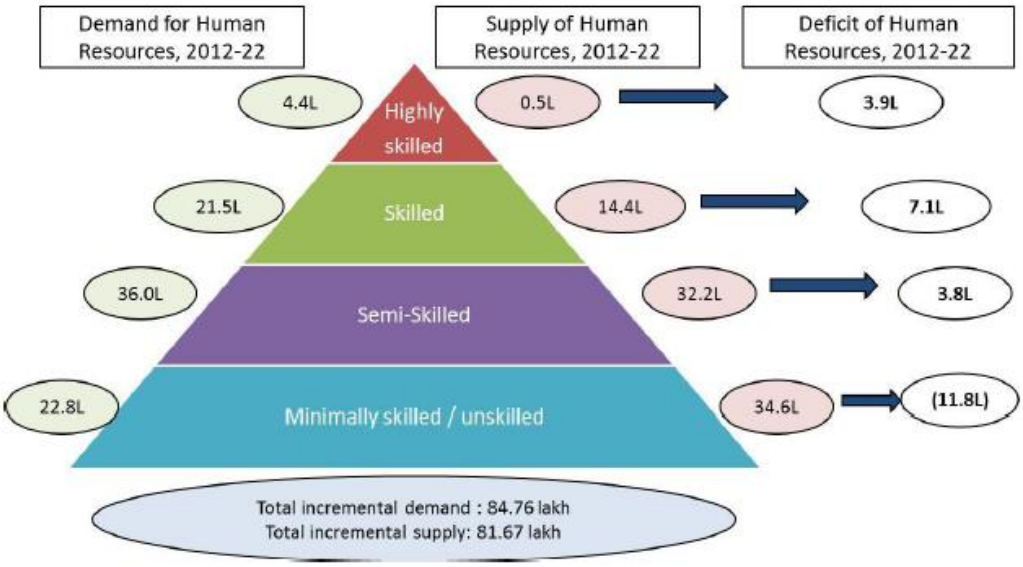
b. Industry-based targets for skilling versus manpower needs - The latter point also draws strength from field observations that showed how industry requirements were being privileged by restricting the number of students who could opt for VSE. Currently, VSE has been restricted to just25 students for each trade sector per class/batch of students in one school. A maximum of two trades have been allowed to be introduced per school, thus allowing for a maximum of 50 students to be enrolled for vocational education courses per class in each school (MHRD, 2014). With the schools visited having over 50 students in class 9, what this has meant is that a section of the student population in these schools (as well as students in the other 50,000 odd government schools in Karnataka, that do not have the VSE programme),[8] fail to get these opportunities for professional development. While the yearly cohort of students completing secondary education in Karnataka is roughly 0 .7 to 0.8 million, the new policy initiative on vocationalising secondary education targets only 500 students yearly from this cohort in Karnataka,[9] amounting to 2500 students over the five years given for implementation of the scheme. This amounts to less than one per cent of the cohort of students that is likely to complete secondary education in the next five years, which is in more in line with the shortages in skilled manpower required for industry, rather than in line with manpower planning requirements of the state.

This observation in fact was even reiterated by a high level official of the labour department in Karnataka, who argued that plans for introducing skills programmes in the state were based on projections of shortage in skilled manpower made by the private, industry body - NSDC, which has indicated a shortage of 1.4 million personnel by 2022. However, as per the draft Skills policy of the Government of Karnataka, the cohort that joins the workforce each year itself was as large as 1.1million, and thus planning for just 1.4 million individuals over the next seven years amounted to planning only for about one-fifth of the young people who need training. Further , the draft Policy document also estimates that about 7.5 million people who are either presently employed but lack requisite skills or are unemployed should be included in the target group for skill education (Department of Skill Development, Entrepreneurship and Livelihood, Government of Karnataka, 2016). Adding these figures, the rough estimate for skilling for would be close to 15 million for the period 2012-22. It is clear that the NSDC estimates as depicted in the figure below is largely short of the population that needs skilling.

[8] The number of schools under the Education Department in Karnataka amounts to 49,955, and an additional 1,171 schools are managed by the Social Welfare Department and District Level Administrative bodies, known as 'Zilla Panchayats' (Source: NSDC, 2013). Of these, only 100 schools have been selected in Karnataka for the implementation of VSE.

[9] i.e., 50 students per class in a year in one school, with the programme implemented in a total of 100 schools in Karnataka

Figure 10: Demand-supply gap in Karnataka, 2012 to 2022



Source: IMaCS Analysis

Source: NSDC, 2013

It is evident that the skill education programme is not geared to educate the vast number of youth for future employment but is guided by the narrow principles of industry-based manpower planning. Even more important to note is that even from the perspective of manpower planning, this is not an advisable approach to train only the number that the industry is projecting for. As Majumdar (1983) points out, a forward-thinking education system must take into account the effects of various domains - micro and macro, private and public, and individual and collective - on decision making. Thus, he argues that investments made by a country in training 20 equally promising high-quality physicists may possibly result in unexpected outcomes, such as only 5 out of the 20 practising asphysicists, while the remaining may enter other fields. Thus, he argues that manpower planning must be sensitive to such contingencies. (Majumdar, 1983). These are critical challenges that any social policy making exercise faces in a highly stratified society, where policy is also a tool for getting to the goals of gender, social and economic equality, and not merely an efficiency-driven means.

c. Personal characteristics of learners, and exclusion based on industry needs - As discussed above, vocational education at the secondary school level is being introduced for a small number of the total population of students in class 9 and 10. This has made it necessary for trainers to select among the pool of students available in class 9 for implementing the skills training programme.

Field observations showed that trainers resorted to a process of selection through non-standardised entrance tests.[10] In some cases this also resulted in screening based on the medium in which students' received education - for example, with students receiving Kannada medium education (i.e., in the local language of the state) being excluded from opportunities to take up courses in the area of Information Technology (IT). The rationale provided by trainers for this was that employers in the IT field demanded a knowledge of English and thus students with Kannada medium education would not match the requirements of the industry. Similar explanations were also given by trainers in other sectors such as automobile, who pointed out that since practical examinations for the skills subjects were conducted by industry representatives (and not by the education department, unlike for the other general subjects), students have to be additionally trained to respond in English. Thus, what became apparent again was the operationalisation of the policy in ways that privileged industry demands and needs over choice and control over learning for students. Again this has inadvertently created tiers of exclusion within sections of the population within government schools itself, based on evaluations of their personal characteristics and whether these fit in with industry needs.

This also indicates a trend wherein employability of students has become contingent not just on their technical knowledge (e.g., of IT or automobile engineering that can be got through the skills courses), but is also dependent on other personal characteristics and variables that students are able to bring on board in order to fit themselves with industry needs. More often than not, these personal characteristics are a reflection of the social status and positioning; for instance, women and persons from traditionally oppressed castes are less likely to have easy access to English education.

d. Personal responsibility for skill acquisition to compensate for poor quality education - So far we have discussed the formal, long-term vocational education programmes deployed within government schools and the forms of exclusion that this has created. In addition to these, we also observed how private, modular courses for skilling enabled by the policy contribute to these processes of exclusion. As discussions with trainers and students from a private skills training agency in Bangalore showed private, modular skills programmes, , are mainly being offered to compensate for the poor quality of education available through the mainstream education system. For example, one skills training organisation that we visited was offering training in IT (particularly in software development and testing) to freshers as well as experienced professionals to improve their chances of recruitment within industry. Students were mainly middle class graduates with professional degrees in engineering and computer sciences. The fee structure for the short-term courses which ranged in duration between 1-6 months was between Rs. 4000-40,000. What was described as the most valuable aspect of these courses, though they were similar in content to

[10] With no guidelines given as to how students must be selected for these vocational courses, trainers were observed to be using their own criteria for selection through entrance tests.

courses offered within mainstream education, by both the trainers and students, was that they were developed with industry input, thus closely matching industry requirements. The courses were also said to be constantly upgraded, and fifty percent of the course time was also spent in training students in 'soft skills' that have become critical measures demanded by industry. In fact one student-respondent, Zamal Pasha,[11] even stated that though college education had required him to make presentations and communicate in English, these skills were sharpened through these modular courses in ways that fitted in with industry preferences (e.g., through training in slide designs, colour schemes, etc., preferred by industry). He further even stated that the main advantage of opting for such modular training was that it increased one's chances of recruitment.

What became apparent through these limited interactions with students and trainers from these private, modular skills programmes was how these programmes compensated for the poor relevance of mainstream education by catering more specifically to the needs of industry. What is important to note here is how private skilling agencies have been adopted as solutions within policy to address the deficits of the education system as a whole. This also means that such opportunities for gaining more relevant certifications and qualifications can only be accessed by those with the means to pay for such courses, thus once again excluding more disadvantaged communities from gaining training that can dramatically improve one's chances for employment and mobility.

Thus, as observed through the short-term fieldwork, the skills policy and programmes appeared to be reducing end beneficiary control over learning in at least four significant ways, as presented above, while increasing industry control over the determination of who must be 'skilled' and what constitutes employability itself. In fact, control over educational planning has also been removed from the departments of the state governments, who appeared to struggle to make provisions to implement the highly centralised skills programmes, based on central government schemes and orders. Education being a concurrent subject in India (i.e., control over educational administration and planning is present at both the central and state levels), this has created inevitable challenges. The lack of state control was evident from discussions with state labour and education department officials which showed they had neither been consulted about the manpower requirements for the state, nor had they been included in the planning process such that they could make adequate provisions to implement the skills programme - such as by having the skills subjects regularised through discussion within the state legislature to include the subjects in the state board of studies; by making adequate infrastructure provisions in schools for the new subjects; by clearly preparing school staff to implement these subjects, etc. This resulted in delays in the implementation of the skills courses, such that for students who passed out of class 10 in the first batch, having

[11] Names have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality

completed the first two levels of VSE, , no provisions had been made to continue the vocational subjects in class 11 and 12.

Further, the skills programmes also appear to not match with student aspirations within these government schools, wherein students mostly desired for government jobs - e.g., as teachers of the education department, police and military - as it offers more permanency, security and social security benefits. Instead the skills programmes, in the areas of IT, healthcare, retail and automobile seek to prepare students for the urban service sector, which offers low-paying, temporary and casualised forms of employment.

Conclusion

The paper reflects on the outcomes of the new trends in education towards 'skilling' that has moved it further away from broader conceptions of *education as* personal development, to behavioural conceptions of workforce preparation through the development of a narrow set of skills. Skills education push education systems to adopt a cafeteria approach, and introduce on-demand, user-fee based training, that lay onus on individuals to gain the right sets of skills, while pushing those without the purchasing power to gain these skills out, or restrict them to lower ends of the service economy. While thought to afford greater control to students by allowing for choice, in essence skills education structures choices according to industry prerequisites of quantity and quality of manpower, that constantly changes with economic cycles. In India too, investment in skilling (which is at 1.5 per cent of the GDP) shows trends of greater inequities being fostered in the long run. With about 35 per cent of the population still out of school, and only 20 per cent able to access higher education, India invests only 3.3 per cent of the GDP in mainstream education (which is much lower than other countries such as USA and China). Plans to increase expenditure on education to 6 per cent of GDP has failed to be implemented, despite repeated assertions made within the Five Year Plans (i.e., plans made by the government for investments in different social sectors every five years). Thus, investments in skilling suggest a critical diversion of much needed funds for general education. Seen along with the targets set for skilling as per industry needs, it is clear that state goals to create greater inclusion through skilling is largely rhetorical. If concerns of social equity and inclusion must be addressed, while addressing manpower needs of industry, India needs to adopt a broader approach to education, that guarantees all students access to general education as well as specific technical skills.

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