Transferable skills in India: Understanding the needs for schooling in the 21st century

Educational measurement

Research reveals high levels of youth unemployment across India: a study conducted by OECD in 2017 found that more than 30 percent of people aged 15-29 were not in employment or training. While this is clearly a complex issue, relating to systemic factors such as the availability of suitable jobs, some researchers claim that it also relates to a shortfall in the types of skills and abilities required in the labour market of the 21st century.

Across South Asia (and indeed, globally), the changing nature of the job market is leading to an increasing awareness of what are often called ‘transferable skills’ or ‘21st century skills’. There are frequent calls for a focus on proficiencies such as problem solving, critical thinking, team work and communication, which are increasingly in demand within newly emerging employment sectors. While some question the extent to which these skills can in fact be defined as ‘new’, the impact of the debate is already being felt on education policy. In India, this is seen in inputs for the draft New Education Policy (from 2016), which emphasise the need for schools to equip students with skills which will help them within a globalised ‘knowledge economy’.

How do we measure 21st century skills amongst school children?

Typically, education researchers have tended to focus on what are classed as ‘traditional’ school subjects: mathematics, language, science. However, there is now increasing interest in being able to understand the extent to which schools (as well as other out-of-school initiatives) are providing children with an opportunity to develop a more transferable skillset.

Devising ways to measure such skills accurately can be challenging. In 2017, a study by researchers at J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) found that children working in markets in Kolkata possessed much better mathematics abilities than a school-based test would have revealed. While they struggled with pen-and-paper tests, the children were able to perform similar mathematical operations when presented to them in the form of applied market transactions. This suggests that ‘transferable skills’ can’t be measured in the same way as tests of curriculum content, at least not if we want to understand how meaningful they are in a ‘real world’ context. Similarly, evaluators of a
'life skills’ project by Room to Read, which teaches transferable skills such as confidence, decision-making and self-esteem to female students attending lower secondary school in India, have been piloting a number of unusual ways of testing its success which are far removed from more traditional assessment methods. In one example, students are asked to complete a ‘scavenger hunt’ in their village, asking them to fetch increasingly hard-to-find items. This tests their ability to persevere and negotiate - key skills for the labour market and beyond – in a way which a written test would not be able to do.

21st century skills: a new opportunity or more of the same?

We don’t know yet what types of jobs India’s school children will be doing in ten or twenty years’ time – this is all the more reason to focus on skills which have transferability and utility in a wide range of applications. Yet, as pointed out in an article looking at the 2017 ASER results, what we do know is that the schools of today are failing to provide many with even basic skills, reminding us that while ‘tomorrow’s jobs require different skill sets, the foundational knowledge provided by today’s education is still needed.’

What’s more, there is a concern that unless existing inequities within the Indian education system can be addressed, these transferable skills may come to represent another way in which deeply embedded inequalities continue to be perpetrated. When collecting data on problem solving and critical thinking amongst lower secondary students in India in 2016-17, the Young Lives school survey found that these skills were as unequally distributed as more traditional school subjects, with children from disadvantaged socio-economic groups and those in rural areas displaying considerably lower abilities. If we agree that these skills have some use or importance in future employability, this finding raises serious concerns that they, like so many other areas, will prove to be another means through which intergenerational inequalities continue to be reinforced.