Challenging the Binary of Vocation and Profession: A Framework for New-age Work Education

~ *Dr Pritha Chakrabarti*

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The one class in the week we knew we could safely 'bunk' was the SUPW period. Among friends, we called it "Some Useful Period Wastage" with little or no knowledge of the actual full form of the acronym: *Socially Useful Productive Work*. Imagined as a means of allowing school students to participate in community life in a more effective manner, while contributing to the notion of nation building, this subject has a long history across the different moments of development of the Indian economy. From 'craft education' to 'work education' to 'SUPW', the journey has had a troubled past with mainstream education. With this past in mind, the new NEP 2020 and the complementary NCF (National Curriculum Framework) for school education has now come up with 'Vocational Education' as an alternative, with the vision to incorporate it as part of the mainstream curriculum. To this measure, the policy enlists new ways of bridging the gaps between knowledge and skills, at foundational, preparatory, middle, and secondary school levels. While as far as the principles enshrined in the policy go, they provide great answers to the folks who question the importance of school education in their professional lives. Yet still grappling with the legacy of nation building, the policy struggles to balance between the existing models of vocational education and the new ones that it proposes. In this article, I will try to outline this legacy, followed by the changes that NCF offers. I will then go on to explore the gaps in the policy in terms of the examples provided and the principles proposed and offer a possible solution while remaining within the framework of the policy.

Legacy of SUPW

Inspired by the Gandhian idea of incorporating skill building within the school curriculum, the Kothari Commission (1964-66) introduced "work experience" as part of the school-level education to carry forward the Nehruvian model of national development. A decade or so later, the review committee that was set up to review the ten-years' school education model, also known as the Ishwarbhai Patel Committee of 1977, coined the term *Socially Useful Productive*

Work. The Review Committee's report defines SUPW as "purposive, meaningful, manual work resulting in goods or services which are useful to the society". When SUPW was first introduced in the school curriculum in 1978 following the recommendations of the Ishwarbhai Patel Committee, it continued to focus on building capacity for crafts/trade through primary, upper primary and secondary levels, incorporating the "Earn while you Learn" model to induct students to the manufacture of coir or door mats, preparation of squash, jams, pickles, etc., as well as to introduce them to productive activities like knitting, garment making, carpentry, book binding, pisciculture, etc.

However, the Program of Action document of 1992 for the National Policy of Education 1986, pointed out the huge gap between the vision and implementation of this project:

> The estimated number of students seeking admission to +2 in 1985 is of the order of 25 lakhs. Even if 10% of this population was to be diverted for vocational courses, the number should have been over 2.50 lakhs, against the present intake of 0.72 lakhs. The problem can be further appreciated, if this data is seen against the Kothari Commission's recommendation, expecting a diversion of 50% of 10+ students for vocational education. (33)

The idea behind introducing SUPW from the primary school level was to build the requisite skills, aptitude, and attitude for a section of the student population to take up vocational courses after their secondary level. Pointing out the lack of professional career advancement opportunities for students opting for vocational courses, the document also says:

> The current prejudice against vocational education will not disappear unless a reasonable chance of worthwhile employment or an advantage in moving upwards into a professional or general programme of education is provided to the students of vocational courses at the secondary level. (34)

With this lacuna in mind, the policy proposes various measures ranging from reservation of students for vocational courses in jobs to building of higher educational opportunities targeted at them. But over time, SUPW courses were reduced to craft period in urban schools, divided along the lines of gender, with tokenistic carpentry classes taking precedence over knitting for boys, and girls being offered crochet lessons. Even adding a letter grade in board exam results did not add any value to the SUPW classes, which remained far from emerging as any 'useful', 'productive' or 'meaningful' work, connected to the future career

of the students. At its best, SUPW remained an extracurricular activity, and its worst, the acronym came to assume various distortions among disinterested and disgruntled students.

NCF 2023 and its solutions

One of the key contributions of the new National Education Policy 2020 and the consequent National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2023), is to create a distinction between *arts* and *crafts* and *vocational skills*, especially in the secondary level. With the aim to "overcome the social status hierarchy associated with vocational education", the policy proposes integration of the vocational education programmes into mainstream education. To this end, it has created four subject groups for Secondary school (Classes 9-12):

Group 1 (Languages)

Group 2 (Art Education, Physical Education, Vocational Education)

Group 3 (Social Science and Humanities, Interdisciplinary areas)

Group 4 (Science, Mathematics and Computational Thinking)

Significantly, as a move away from the earlier model of being "socially useful", or, focusing on capacity building of a community, the new policy proposes Vocational Education (VE) as an integral part of an individual's personal and career growth. With a thrust on hands-on learning, to bridge the gap between 'knowledge' imparted at school and the 'skills' demanded by the industry, the policy defines VE as a means of "capacity building for work" that "would enable students to be productive members of their households as well as participate in the economy." Continuing the Gandhian theme of rightfully instilling 'dignity of labour', the policy also notes that for this NCF there is:

> […] no categorical difference between 'vocations' and 'professions'. While the general usage of the two words in India tends to give 'higher social status' to 'professions' and 'professional education,' it is 'vocation' that has the connotation of 'higher calling.' The NCF does not differentiate between vocations and professions.

This is a significant difference from the preceding policies, which have made a clear distinction between the percentage of people choosing VE and those opting for other professions. Within this framework, the vocational training at

the secondary level targets "students who want to enter the job market immediately after school certification," almost preparing them to do so if they so wish, without any associated prejudice.

Thus, the scope of vocational education courses has also been expanded in this new framework. Rather than prescribing specific courses or careers, the policy notes three buckets of work:

1. Work with Life Forms
2. Work with Materials and Machines
3. Work in Human Services

While students in Classes 9-10 are expected to gain exposure to at least two forms of work under each of these buckets, the aim is to tailor the choice of work in terms of it being locally relevant yet aspirational, where students will build capacities for work that they are not commonly exposed to at home. This is because, among the aims of this integration of vocation education with mainstream subjects is to "develop capacities to be gainfully employed in one or more specific vocations after leaving school."

Finally, the policy aims to undo the exclusionary nature of Vocational Education practices where different sets of 'work' are designated to people from different gender/social groups. To this end, the policy recommends a focus on equity:

> Existing social inequities must be consciously addressed. The school should avoid identifying particular types of work to specific communities or gender. Instead, the school must encourage engagement with different types of work for all students, irrespective of their home background and gender.

This would hopefully challenge the existing social constructs of boys pursuing carpentry and girls being handed the knitting needles!

The burden of legacy and possible solutions

While these are some of the welcome changes that the policy offers, a closer look between the lines and a thorough screening of the examples provided in the document would reveal that despite these principles that the policy outlines, especially in terms of not differentiating between vocation and profession, the policy tends to exemplify such work that are not economically aspirational in any way. So, while it is a great idea for every student to learn basics of electrical, plumbing, cooking, or tailoring work, it hardly tells us the profession that a student can aspire to pursue with these capacities. It is important to show to the

students that learning tailoring skills could help them take up fashion designing as a profession in future, or knowledge of cooking could open doors in the hospitality industry. Instead of stopping at carpentry or pottery, which can be taught in middle-school, students can then graduate to pursuing 3-D printing and product design in the secondary level. But, if, according to the policy, a student's training in various skills through middle school and classes 9-10 is to prepare them to build capacities for a career in classes XI-XII, then the policy hardly helps us understand how they connect to one another, except by enhancing the skills. Rather than an approach of just increasing levels of difficulty over the years, over a range of various kinds of work, it is important to show the interconnectedness of the skills across multiple professions.

In this context, the broad scope of the three buckets can be useful but can also be a challenge keeping in mind the disconnected nature of the different forms of work education being offered. For instance, a student in a rural setting learning to work with lifeforms has far more options, from agriculture to pisciculture to horticulture to sericulture, etc. But the same student in an urban setting has been offered little options other than gardening and kitchen gardening. Instead, a more aspirational profession-oriented approach on, say, pet grooming, or even wildlife photography, would allow the students to find suitable employment as well as entrepreneurial opportunities after their school. Moreover, this urban/rural divide will keep the work-divide alive positing a challenge to the equity principle outlined in the policy. The clause that a student getting exposure to certain work at home should learn other forms of work, rather than developing their existing skillset towards more aspirational careers, would end up reproducing a divide between vocation and profession in practice. Instead, a student who is exposed to pottery skills should be given the knowledge and know-how of marketing those skills. Rather than just taking urban students to rural settings to learn how to do pottery through a 'fun' outing (and I quote this from the policy), why not bring the child from the rural setting to a clay modelling exhibition in the city to show them the scope of their existing skill set? And why not then expose them to the basics of design principles to

help them understand how these skills can gear them towards profitable professions?

The second work bucket of working with materials and machines keep harping on use of heavy machinery for a rural child and learning to use basic tools for a child from an urban school. Instead, one can, for example, choose such 'machineries' that can build career trajectories for both the urban and rural child. A good example of this is a camera. Learning how to use a camera effectively, both for photography and videography, or learning the basic skills of video editing, can be made accessible to children across the board. If computer education has been made accessible to all, so can skills such as these which will help students gain respectable employability as well as build their own business in wedding photography, videography as well as fill the gap in the market for the huge number of editors required by companies, big and small! With easier access to mobile phones with camera and easily downloadable free

applications, these skills can be taught right from middle school, with more professional tools like a DSLR camera or Mirrorless Camera being made available at the secondary level. From YouTube influencers to cinematographers, there is a very wide scope of capacity building if one focuses on such 'machinery' that can build what the NCF calls '21st Century Skills'.

The final bucket of work aimed at the service industry can also benefit from

being interconnected with the other two. Learning to use a camera in the second bucket can be complemented with setting up a YouTube channel under this bucket. Or learning the wherewithal of setting up a community radio channel or a podcast service alongside learning how to use light and mic effectively under the second bucket, would allow a student,

irrespective of their location to become proficient in choosing a sustainable as well as aspirational career path in their future. One of the key capacities that one can build in today's time is the ability to manage a social media page effectively and to learn about digital marketing. Irrespective of the career path one chooses, these skills can come in handy to not only gain employability, but also to build one's own brand, even if one chooses to pursue a traditional profession like that of a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or teacher.

At a time when higher education landscape in India is undergoing drastic changes, with massive scale of privatization of education resulting in quality skill-based higher education becoming more expensive than ever, the NCF offers a way out through its vocational education policy. The exit policies enshrined in NEP 2020 further allows students to continue one or two years of certificate/diploma education if required to hone their skills further. The option of apprenticeship (internship) of over a month at secondary level would give students exposure to real-work scenarios, also allowing them to intern with masters in the field for ten days during their middle school. From college applications to individual entrepreneurship, these measures have the potential to guide students in the right directions, filling the gap between knowledge and skills. As the average age of the workforce in the Indian economy gets younger, these measures can provide a level playing field between students graduating from international boards and those from national curriculums. However, a consistent planning in terms of choice of professions, right from the middle-school level would be useful to give direction to the students in a more focused manner. Rather than offering a wide range of options, it is useful to think of interconnected and interdependent skill sets for each bucket, which would at once broaden the scope of capacity building as well as effectively manoeuvre their career paths in sustainable and aspirational directions. Let us not reduce vocational education to hobbies. Hopefully, then no one will call these periods a 'wastage' anymore!

Pritha Chakrabarti is Assistant Professor at the Dadasaheb Phalke International Film School, MIT World Peace University, Pune. Prior to this, she has taught courses in films, media, writing, research methods, literature, and culture and communication at the Centre for Writing & Pedagogy, Krea University, and various institutes of Symbiosis International (deemed university). She conducts workshops on academic

writing for students and teachers at school, college, and universities across the country. Her current research interest lies in the study of films, digital media, and critical pedagogy.

Have you been mulling over this argument between professional skills and vocational education? Are your thoughts vis-à-vis what the author is telling? Tell us some of the roadblocks that you face in implementing them. Write to us at OTTIndia@oup.com to initiate a discussion on this.

Curriculum Planning & Designing: Vocational Education

~ Dr Pritha Chakrabarti

While many a lesson plan can be developed in vocational education, the major form of training and assessment in this subject should be 'by doing'.

Moreover, if one is to follow the scheme that the different forms of work can be interconnected and interdependent across subjects taught and across levels, then it becomes imperative that a lesson plan in Vocational Education is explained in terms of its progression across middle school and secondary stage.

Here is a sample given below which focuses upon training students for new-age professions.

The form of work buckets from middle school until secondary school can be divided as follows:

Progression of Illustrative Content in Different Forms of Work across Middle and Secondary Stage onto Higher Education

Forms of Work	Middle	Secondary (Vocations)	Professional College
Life Forms	• Learning about the natural habitat of local birds and animals through regular field walks. • Study of different landscapes and plantations that attract various life forms. • Soil management and basic earthwork	• Wildlife photography • Nature conservation • Forest restoration • Environmental data analysis • Environmental/Climate reporting	• Wildlife photographer • Nature photographer • Ecologist • Environmental lawyer • Ornithologist • Environmental specialist
Machine and Materials	• Different types of framing and composition • Study of camera angles, types of shots, forms of light • Video editing applications • Poster making on different topics by hand/using applications • Handicraft work using materials such as paper, wood, clay, fabric, paints, inks	• Photojournalism • Event videography using DSLR/mirrorless camera • Video editing on computer • Graphic design • 3D modelling • Product design	• Editor • Cinematographer • Fashion photographer • Product photographer • Event photographer / Videographer • Product designer • Filmmaker
Human Services	• Aptitude to communicate well • Use of microphones • Writing content and scripts • Social media management	• Making your own podcast • Running school community radio • Running school's social media page/a YouTube channel. • Digital media marketing	• Media professional • Journalist • Content creator • Influencer • Digital marketer • Content writer

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Métier

Pronunciation: /ˈmetɪeɪ/

Meaning: A person's work, especially when they have a natural skill or ability for it.

Origin and additional information: 1785–95; <French; Old French *mestier* < Gallo-Romance **misterium,* for Vulgar Latin *ministerium (work ministry)*.

Usually used in its singular form, the word originates from formal French. The word is used to denote a type of work that one has a natural ability to do well and therefore enjoys doing it. Words similar in meaning as métier include *craft*, *field*, *forte*, *profession*, *pursuit*, *trade*, etc.

Usage:

1. *He followed many unsuccessful paths before finding his true métier.*
   (**Source:** https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com)

2. *Our métier is not to compare, but to take what pleases us from each.*
   (**Source:** https://www.dictionary.com/browse/metier)

3. *Fighting seemed their métier and most of them preferred it to the monotony of working a mine.*
   (**Source:** Project Gutenberg)