

Education for What?: De-mystifying the World Bank Education Agenda

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As a citizen concerned about the education crisis in India and much of the Third World, the newfound interest of international agencies, such as the World Bank, in education reform may give us cause for optimism and hope. It appears that there is not only a new level of commitment to education reform on the part of the World Bank, but one that is poised to make fundamental changes in the education system. To begin with, one fundamental change that is apparent is the coordinated involvement of both state and civil society sectors in the reform process. The imagery of state officials working alongside non-governmental organizations to ensure a decent education for the poor and marginalized, under the benevolent eye of the international community, is both seductive and powerful, no doubt. It appears that finally a common vision has been forged that truly unites the concerns of the common person for a good education, with those of the state and international aid bureaucracy for quality Education for All, especially the marginalized. The seductive power of forging a common will on an issue that everyone agrees is a fundamental human right is precisely what makes it difficult to question the purpose of these reforms and the intent of its lead actors.

However, if we leave interrogating intentionality aside (which is quite an empty exercise) and presume good intentions on the part of all the actors, and instead move toward reflecting upon the discourse of the reforms, the nature of the interventions recommended, and the priorities emphasized, we may be better able to understand the implications of the new policy directives in education. For purposes of this article, I will focus on what appears to be one of the foundational narratives of the proposed reforms. Let us begin with the basic template developed by the World Bank, upon which many of the policy and programmatic reforms in education, not only in India, but in other parts of the ‘developing’ world, are based. The template presented in the Education Sector Strategy paper of the World Bank is elegant in its simplicity; it states that there are three pillars of a good education system – i) Access, ii) Quality, and iii) Delivery.

Even to the ‘unschooled’ eye, the principles of access to education, quality and delivery all appear patently obvious and necessary to building an effective education system. On closer examination, however, each of these elements relate primarily to the provision of education, or more precisely, involve the development of mechanisms for the provision of education. In other words, each of these elements have much to do with the mechanisms through which education is to reach the school-going population, and little to do with the nature or content of this education itself. Succinctly put, these three principles privilege form over content, or the ‘how’ over the ‘what’ — a characteristic feature of the postmodern era.

In terms of policy recommendations, access to education most often implies locating school buildings more conveniently, especially for more remote populations, or changing school timings for the those who have to work. Quality of education most often translates into improving the teaching-learning process, developing new teaching

methods, new materials that make the learning process more appealing and easy for children, and so on. Delivery of education is concerned with instituting effective management routines, developing feasible budgets and monitoring mechanisms for the smooth running of schools. Each pillar clearly prioritizes the issue of *how* to construct a more effective link between students and the school system, so that students actually come to school, stay in school and learn. In themselves, these are laudable goals and no sensible educator would wish to quarrel with them. What I wish to question is what is being left out of these proposals, and not the stated goals of the proposals per se.

For one, the World Bank Education Sector Strategy paper, as well as the thick volume on Primary Education in India, have very little to say about what education is going to be all about in this new phase of reform. There is absolutely no effort made to articulate the ‘what’ of education, the ‘why’ is presumed to be already answered (basic education is a human right), and, as per their documents, the only question that appears worth answering is the ‘how’. The scarce moments when the content of education is alluded to, it is clear that consensus is assumed as to what constitutes a relevant education — a consensus that supposedly includes the ideas/views of common people.

For instance, a statement such as, “If people are not gaining the knowledge, skills, and values they need, resources invested in teaching and learning are wasted” (World Bank, 1999). In this statement, which is typical of the reports, the concern, as always, is with the resources and their efficient use, while the former part of the sentence is accorded no attention at all. That is, the knowledge, skills, and values that people ‘need’ (how about what people ‘desire’ as opposed to ‘need’?¹) is presumed to require little if any discussion at all. When these are mentioned, it is always through the prism of human capital theory. It is baldly stated that education, especially basic education, is for the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics, and the “attitudes necessary for the workplace” (World Bank, 1995). This pragmatic view of education is rationalized and legitimized as ‘giving people what they need’. Yet, ‘giving people what they need’ portrays ‘need’ as self-willed and voluntaristic, when in actuality many of our ‘needs’ are determined for us by a certain set of structural arrangements which leave no scope for common people to voluntarily define their needs. Educational choices based on ‘need’ may more often reflect coercive relations of power, rather than the will of people.

An alternative discourse of education reform may privilege precisely these neglected questions in education – what are the knowledge, skills, and values people need and desire, and toward what ends? In an alternative discourse on education, the answers to these fundamental questions are not presumed to be self-evident or already always determined, and instead constitute an ongoing struggle to define and redefine a world of integrity and human dignity. In alternative discourses on education, the question of ‘toward what ends’ remains a central philosophical issue that needs to be contested, re-examined and re-formulated, particularly because prevailing definitions of the ends of education are having a devastating impact on the quality of human life, the natural environment, and our relations with one another.

Herein lies a critical difference between the World Bank proposals and the alternative discourses. In the World Bank proposals, the goals of education are assumed to be a foregone conclusion – namely, building human capital for increasing national productivity, as in the production and consumption of (economically valued) goods and services. To quote: “The World Bank’s strategy for reducing poverty focuses on promoting the productive use of labor — the main asset of the poor — and providing basic social services to the poor. Investment in education contributes to the accumulation of human capital, which is essential for higher incomes and sustained economic growth” (World Bank, 1995) That this definition of education’s purpose is leading to a ‘race to the bottom,’ both between national economies and between groups of people within nations, is of scant regard to the institution. Nations, as well as individual citizens, are competing with one another to market their wares as cheaply and as best as possible, in order to capture a share of the world market. Some of the direct effects of such competition to increase one’s GNP are lower wages, poor work environments, environmental damage, overuse of natural resources, huge levels of displacement of people, and intra-national and international conflicts and wars.²

Given the above scenario, the question of ‘education for what’ can hardly be relegated to a non-issue. Instead, it has become even more urgent for us to debate and dialogue over — a dialogue in which ‘the people’ are not some generic unified group, but are real people, deeply conflicted over our visions of a ‘good education’ and ‘the ideal society’. In most countries, and certainly in India, serious conflicts have emerged over defining a relevant education for the national populations. These conflicts are (1) in part related to the increasingly insecure economic environment across the globe, (2) in part related to the rise of ethnic nationalisms, and (3) in part related to the rise of new social movements. The first instance is clearly a case in which the goals of education are being determined in a reactive manner, as a ‘survival response’ to global competition for scarce resources, including (well) paid employment. The singular emphasis on schooling to ensure the employability, especially of the poor, fits within this reactive mode to economic distress. International institutions such as the World Bank are guilty of not only operating within this reactive mode, but also of enforcing it as rational policy. In doing so, they misrepresent the forces of global competition as originating from some inescapable, inscrutable and universal logic, rather than as being socially determined and humanly constructed.

Although much more complicated, I would argue that the definition of relevant education in the second instance (namely, ethnic nationalisms) is also a reactive response to perceived or real threats to one’s survival as an ethnic or racial group. Some have argued that the economic discourse of ‘survival of the fittest’ is translated into the cultural realm to the extent that not simply domination, but the annihilation of other groups, is seen as a necessary condition to one’s own existence (Chossudovsky, 1997). In these cases, education is devoted to developing sectarian identities that are traditionalist, pure and purposive, and in perpetual historical conflict with other groups.³

It is in the final emergent condition, that is, in the case of new social movements, that we see a far more constructivist approach to defining the purpose of education. In other

words, their educational interventions are aimed less at optimizing one's survival within the existing framework of global competition, and more at transforming the existing framework itself. New social movements, which include a wide number of grassroots organizations working locally in many parts of the Third World, are engaged in constructing educational alternatives that symbolize a different vision of the world, and of the social relations therein. Education in these instances is geared toward the development of those critical and creative capacities that will help people build a just and caring society. The education discourse here is inflected not with the voices of economists calling for efficiency and human capital development, but by the work of a number of radical educationists, among whom Paulo Freire is perhaps best known.

From early on, such efforts to re-imagine the purpose of education have been driven by a concern for marginalized groups such as rural communities, indigenous groups, and migrant labor. Schools modeled along the lines of an industrial economy and geared toward meeting the needs of such an economy simply did not fulfill the educational needs or desires of such groups. Responding not only to the marginalization, but also to the continued poverty and exploitation of these groups, radical educationists sought to reinvent the purpose of education, as education for consciousness-raising and social transformation. Changing the purpose of education, of course, also meant changes to the form education took – curricula, structures, processes – making it appear quite unlike the formal, inflexible, hierarchical, abstract, didactic education of modern schooling. With a few exceptions, much of this creative work has continued in a local manner through community-based organizations and struggles too numerous to name here.⁴

However, the minority of 'losers' itself is rapidly becoming the majority, as the numbers of those who are poor, who work in the 'informal' economy, and who have been displaced by war and a fragmented industrial economy, are reaching alarming proportions across the globe. Further, even for the select urban middle class, who perhaps have been best served by modern schools, the functional relationship between schooling and the economy is proving increasingly uneven and unpredictable. Opportunities for well-paid employment are limited to a narrow range of jobs, generally related to information technology. In this emergent context, it is no longer sufficient to formulate alternative education for an 'alternative' population, because the problem of exclusion and irrelevance is no longer a local one, confined to particular communities.⁵ Instead, it is necessary to raise the question of what constitutes a relevant, appropriate and desirable education to a national and international level, as an issue of consequence to all people across the world.

This does not mean that there is one kind of education that is relevant to all societies and groups or a one-size-fits-all policy, but it does mean that a new consensus needs to be thrashed out on the overall broad philosophical purpose of education in this new era. The present consensus, which has prevailed since the modern industrial era, is that education is for economic survival. Within this consensus, the precise forms that education takes is different in different places, given that there are different levels of survival within the economy.⁶ Analogous to the education-economy coupling, I do believe that a new

vision of the purpose of education needs to be ‘consensed’⁷, one which is coupled with a vision of a just, peaceful, ecological, post-industrial, leisure society. In the absence of a common vision that can operate as a value framework, the defense of plurality and difference within civil society posits certain dangers, not the least of which is the very real possibility of opposing and disparate definitions of what constitutes a valuable and relevant education for different groups. If anything, at this moment, we need a policy environment of greater, not less, accountability to human well-being. At the same time, I caution that this common vision is not available as a ready-made package, but requires extensive and open public debate and reflection.⁸

Within this common framework, there will be any number of different forms that education will take, with different content, structures, priorities, and innovations that relate to the histories of particular places and people. Constructing a new vision will involve rethinking some of the basic, taken-for-granted features of the education discourse, such as education = schools. We are at a historical moment in which schools as we know them are battling to maintain their influence over young minds, a battle which they appear to be losing to the media, religion, technology, and popular culture. In such a context, to isolate schools as the only relevant object of policy reform is a gross distortion of what constitutes education, of where and how knowledge is produced and disseminated, of what is relevant knowledge, and of how identities are being shaped. Rethinking the goals of education at a fundamental level necessarily implies rethinking our relation to our social and economic environment as a whole.

The reform efforts of the World Bank not only sidestep the fundamental issue of the need to re-envision education’s purpose, but, equally, their emphasis on the technicalities of schooling greatly limit larger debates on education policy. As I have stated above, the debates center around how best to allocate resources to optimize economic returns to schooling, how best to ensure access to schools, and so on. Contending visions around education’s fundamental goals are barely visible in the policy debates on education reform in the Third World. These glaring silences foster an artificial consensus on the supposedly ‘real’ issues in education, making it extremely difficult to create the political will for a genuine and wide ranging debate on fundamental goals, assumptions, and values of ‘education for what’. Unless we are able to challenge this appearance of a consensus and engage in debate over the fundamentals, fewer and fewer people will be served by the present school-to-work link, while more and more resources will be sunk into trying to make it viable. In the process, we lose out on a valuable opportunity to shape educational debates that speak to some of the most pressing issues of our times.

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¹ Education (reduced to the construction of schools and school routines) is premised on what ‘people need’ to be functional and not what they may desire or yearn for in terms of educational activity/experience – e.g., the desire to become more fully human or to develop one’s mind, body, and soul. Peoples’ visions of what education should look like or feel like, not simply for their survival, but for them to be architects of their societies, are not given any space in the discourse at all.

² The World Development Reports of the World Bank and the Human Development Report of the UNDP confirm this frightening scenario.

³ Witness for example the recent interventions by the Hindu Nationalist groups in India in redefining school curriculum to reinscribe a traditionalist Hindu identity in conflict with Muslim and other minority groups in India. See Nalini Taneja, Communalization of Education in India, February 2000. <http://members.xoom.com/southasia/2000-01/edu.htm>

⁴ Exceptions are national programs that took place for brief periods in Nicaragua, Grenada, Tanzania. Examples of alternative initiatives in India are Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Kashtakari Sanghatna, Eklavya, and many more.

⁵ From a humanist standpoint, it can be argued that, by focusing only on cognitive skills, modern schools have not served the interests of humanity in general. Although here I emphasize a crisis of relevance caused by global economic changes, the philosophical perspective on relevance is also an important one.

⁶ These differential forms of education for different levels of survival is what has been attacked as discriminatory, and rightly so. The policy emphasis has therefore tended toward guaranteeing the same form of education that will it is hoped grant the same level of survival within the economy. However, what remains unchallenged in such policy proposals is the basic philosophical principle of yoking education to the economy.

⁷ By this I mean that we need to recognize and must be willing to go through dialogical processes of conflict, difference, and hard negotiation in order to come to a real consensus.

⁸ The model of reform through dialogue and civil society referendums popularized by the Zapatistas comes to mind here. Their approach is decidedly different from the World Bank approach of calling for partnerships among all sectors of civil society, including business, and state institutions to work together for economic reform.