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Editorial

Esteemed Readers,

We wish you a Happy and Harmonious New Year. Well-being is the harmony of body, mind, spirit and opportunity. Real strength is measured in the well-being of all. Let that be the commitment for the year 2026 and content of this issue of *Quest in Education* reflects the same commitment.

Gupinder Kumar's article informs that education lies at the core of sustainable development and gender equality, serving as both a right and a catalyst for transformation. In the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), education emerges as a crucial mechanism for empowering women and promoting inclusive growth. Ms. Aditi Phaldesai, Special Educator, Lokvishwas Pratishtan's Special School Canacona conveys that inclusive education is not just a moral imperative but also a critical step towards creating a more equitable and just society. Comprehensive research paper titled, "Unpacking the NEP 2020: And highlighting the journey of the Indian Education System in the context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Review Study" by Ms. Riya Pal1, Ms. Khushi Tomar and Dr. Sampurna Guha reveal that there is a dire need to overcome these challenges by adopting a comprehensive approach that involves adequate infrastructure, resources, curriculum, etc. such as conducting a skill development program in the area of inclusive education, effective mobilization and management of educational, financial, human resources and improving existing school infrastructure to make it barrier-free in nature. The essay by Shri. Pramit Goel (intern) mentored by Prof. Manisha Karne envisions a reengineered education system that integrates STEM, soft skills, experiential learning, and adaptability. This holistic approach aims to equip future workers to collaborate with machines while leveraging uniquely human capabilities to drive innovation in the digital age.

Obituary for Prof. Girija Gupte by Prof. Dr. Vibhuti Patel provide glimpses of great contributions made by stalwart educationists.

The scholars and experts are requested to send their original research-based articles, case studies and book reviews on contemporary challenges faced by the education sector.

Prof. Vibhuti Patel
Chief Editor

EDUCATION, SDGS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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This paper examines the dynamic link between education and women's empowerment, emphasizing that equitable access to quality learning enhances social participation, economic independence, and leadership opportunities for women (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Drawing on global and national frameworks, including the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and feminist scholarship, it highlights how education contributes to reducing gender disparities and advancing sustainable societies (Kabeer, 2016; Stromquist, 2015). However, persistent structural barriers—such as poverty, digital divides, patriarchal norms, and regional inequalities—continue to limit women's educational and professional opportunities (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2021). The analysis integrates recent studies by Gurpinder Kumar (2025, 2023, 2022a, 2022b), which underscore the need for gender-responsive curricula, inclusive pedagogy, and policy interventions that address both cultural and economic constraints. The paper argues that true empowerment through education requires moving beyond mere access to ensure safety, digital literacy, and participatory learning environments (UN Women, 2023; ADB, 2021). By aligning education policies with gender equality frameworks, nations can create pathways for women to lead social, economic, and political change. Thus, education functions not only as a developmental goal but also as a transformative tool for achieving justice, equity, and sustainable progress.

Keywords: *Education, Sustainable Development Goals, Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Inclusive Learning, India*

Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of social progress. It is not only a means to acquire

knowledge but also a powerful tool for advancing equity, inclusion, and sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly positions education as central to the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which aim to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” and “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, 2015). Education and gender equality are thus interdependent—education empowers women to participate fully in social, economic, and political life, while gender equality ensures that educational systems themselves become more inclusive, representative, and just (UNESCO, 2023).

From a feminist and human development perspective, education is a vehicle for expanding women’s agency and capabilities. As Nussbaum (2011) argues in her Capabilities Approach, the empowerment of women through education enables them to pursue a life of dignity, autonomy, and self-determination. Similarly, Sen (1999) emphasizes that education broadens human freedom, allowing individuals to make choices that contribute to their personal well-being and social progress. In the same vein, Kumar (2020) highlights those Gandhian perspectives on women’s empowerment advocate for holistic education that integrates moral, vocational, and civic values. These theoretical frameworks underscore that education is not merely instrumental but transformative—it redefines power relations and fosters equality. However, despite global commitments to inclusive education, gender disparities continue to persist. According to UNESCO (2022), nearly 130 million girls remain out of school worldwide, with the majority concentrated in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Barriers to education are multifaceted, including poverty, inadequate infrastructure, gender-based violence, and social norms that prioritize boys’ education over girls’ (UNICEF, 2023). In India and other parts of the Global South, these structural inequalities are often reinforced by caste, class, and rural-urban divides, limiting access to quality education for women and girls from marginalized communities (Kabeer, 2016).

Gurpinder Kumar (2025) emphasizes that gender inequality in education remains a critical challenge that requires structural reform.

In his study *Personal Laws, Gender Inequality and Empowerment: A Review*, Kumar argues that deeply entrenched patriarchal systems—reflected in personal and social laws—continue to shape educational access and opportunities for women. Similarly, Kumar (2023), in *A Study of Gender Inequality and Gender Gaps in Education*, underscores that while female literacy rates have improved in India, gender parity remains elusive in higher education, technical training, and leadership roles. These findings indicate that educational inequality cannot be understood in isolation from broader socio-legal and cultural structures.

The connection between education and women’s empowerment is both direct and transformative. Educated women are more likely to participate in the labor force, delay marriage, make informed health choices, and contribute to community development (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, education has a multiplier effect—it benefits families and societies across generations. As the Asian Development Bank (2021) notes, countries that invest in girls’ education experience faster economic growth, lower fertility rates, and greater political stability. Thus, women’s education is not merely a social obligation but an economic and developmental imperative.

Yet, access to education alone does not guarantee empowerment. The quality, content, and context of education determine its transformative potential. Stromquist (2015) argues that education must incorporate gender-responsive curricula that challenge stereotypes, promote critical thinking, and encourage leadership among women. Gulpinder Kumar (2022a) reinforces this argument in his research on *The Role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar toward Education and Gender Empowerment in India*, asserting that Ambedkar’s vision of education as a means of liberation remains crucial to contemporary policy. His work suggests that education should not merely reproduce social hierarchies but serve as a space for empowerment and equality.

Digital literacy has also emerged as a vital dimension of educational empowerment. The UN Women (2023) report on *Gender Equality and Digital Education* warns that the digital gender divide can exacerbate existing inequalities if women and girls are excluded from technology-based learning and employment. Gulpinder Kumar (2022b) supports

this perspective in *Culture and Gender Impact on English Learner and Education*, noting that digital access and language proficiency are key to women's participation in the global knowledge economy. Bridging these divides requires not only technological infrastructure but also gender-sensitive pedagogy that recognizes cultural diversity and women's lived experiences.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusivity, flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning as means to democratize education. However, as Kumar (2022) observes in *Women's Empowerment through Education and Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas on Education*, the success of such reforms depends on integrating ethical and value-based education that nurtures empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility. Education rooted in equality must go beyond literacy—it should cultivate critical consciousness and empower women to challenge systemic injustice.

Furthermore, education plays an essential role in achieving sustainable development across other SDGs. Educated women are key drivers of poverty eradication (SDG 1), improved health (SDG 3), and climate resilience (SDG 13). As Nussbaum (2011) and Kabeer (2016) argue, women's education transforms not only individual lives but also institutional frameworks, fostering justice and sustainability. Kumar (2022c), in his paper *Sustainable Development and Empowerment of Women through Agriculture: Opportunities and Challenges*, highlights how education equips rural women with the skills and knowledge to engage in sustainable agricultural practices, thereby linking economic empowerment with environmental stewardship.

In this context, achieving SDG 4 and SDG 5 demands an intersectional and feminist policy approach. Policymakers must address not only access and infrastructure but also curriculum design, teacher training, and community engagement (ADB, 2021; UN Women, 2023). Gurpinder Kumar's series of studies (2025, 2023, 2022a-c) collectively emphasize that empowerment through education must be rooted in equity, dignity, and cultural inclusivity. Education should cultivate the intellectual and moral capacity of women to participate meaningfully in governance, innovation, and sustainable development.

In conclusion, education remains both a human right and a transformative pathway toward gender equality and sustainable development. Its role extends beyond individual achievement—it shapes collective consciousness and national progress. However, realizing this potential requires dismantling structural barriers and embedding feminist ethics within educational systems. When women and girls are educated, they become not only beneficiaries but architects of a sustainable and equitable future. Thus, in the pursuit of the SDGs, education must be understood not as an end in itself, but as the foundation of empowerment, justice, and transformation (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Kumar, 2025).

Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

Education occupies a central role within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, reflecting its capacity to advance social, economic, and environmental well-being. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envision education not merely as literacy or formal schooling but as a foundation for creating equitable, peaceful, and sustainable societies (United Nations, 2015). Specifically, SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” while SDG 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The interdependence of these two goals underscores that without gender parity in education, sustainable development cannot be realized (UNESCO, 2023).

Education contributes directly and indirectly to nearly all SDGs. For instance, it reduces poverty by improving income opportunities (SDG 1), enhances health and reproductive outcomes (SDG 3), promotes decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and strengthens institutions and justice systems (SDG 16) (World Bank, 2021). Women’s education, in particular, exerts a multiplier effect: educated women are more likely to delay marriage and childbirth, participate actively in the workforce, and ensure better educational outcomes for their children (Kumar, 2022c). These outcomes create intergenerational benefits that contribute to the broader goals of equity, resilience, and sustainability.

However, despite global commitments, the promise of SDG 4 remains unevenly realized. According to UNESCO (2022), approximately 130 million girls worldwide are still out of school, most concentrated in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Barriers such as poverty, gender bias, early marriage, inadequate infrastructure, and digital exclusion continue to undermine educational attainment for women (Kumar, 2023). Moreover, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-induced displacement have exacerbated inequalities, pushing millions of girls out of formal education systems (UNICEF, 2023).

Feminist theorists argue that education should be conceptualized not only as a development tool but also as a means of structural transformation (Stromquist, 2015; Kabeer, 2016). A rights-based and feminist framework calls for the integration of gender-sensitive policies in curriculum design, teacher training, and school governance. Kumar (2025) emphasizes that educational reforms in India must address intersectional inequalities—particularly those linked to caste, class, and rural marginalization—to achieve the targets of SDG 4 and SDG 5 simultaneously. The inclusion of digital literacy, vocational training, and climate education further ensures that women are equipped to participate in contemporary knowledge economies and sustainable transitions.

Ultimately, aligning education with the SDGs requires moving beyond quantitative expansion toward qualitative transformation. This involves reimagining education as a process that empowers individuals to challenge inequality, foster innovation, and build sustainable communities. When governments adopt gender-responsive education systems grounded in human rights and social justice, education becomes the most powerful accelerator of the entire sustainable development agenda.

Education and Women's Empowerment: The Transformative Link

Education and women's empowerment are deeply interlinked, forming a reciprocal relationship in which each reinforces the other. Education empowers women by expanding their capabilities, enhancing self-esteem, and enabling participation in social, political, and economic spheres. As Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1999) argue through their

“capabilities approach,” education enhances women’s ability to lead lives they value by expanding choices and freedoms. Beyond individual benefits, women’s education contributes to social equity, inclusive governance, and democratic participation, thereby reinforcing the structural foundations of empowerment (Stromquist, 2015).

In developing contexts, particularly in India, education serves as a crucial instrument for breaking cycles of poverty and patriarchy. Kumar (2022a) notes that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar viewed education as the first condition for social mobility and women’s liberation. His educational philosophy—rooted in dignity, equality, and justice—continues to inspire feminist pedagogy and public policy. Similarly, Gandhian perspectives on women’s education, emphasizing moral development and self-reliance, provide a framework for inclusive and value-based learning (Kumar, 2022b). Such philosophies remind us that empowerment is both a personal and collective process grounded in ethical and social transformation.

Nevertheless, empowerment through education is not automatic. Structural inequalities—caste hierarchies, gender-based violence, lack of representation, and economic marginalization—often prevent women from fully realizing the potential of education (Kabeer, 2016). Educational institutions can inadvertently reproduce patriarchal norms through gender-biased curricula, unequal classroom dynamics, or exclusionary practices (UNESCO, 2023). Thus, empowerment requires transforming educational systems themselves to be inclusive, participatory, and equitable.

Kumar (2022) argues that empowerment must be approached through “contextual feminism,” where educational interventions are designed according to local socio-cultural realities. This involves incorporating gender-responsive pedagogy, safe learning spaces, and mentorship programs that encourage leadership among girls. Moreover, the digital revolution presents both opportunities and challenges for empowerment. While technology can expand access to knowledge and employment, the gendered digital divide continues to marginalize women, particularly in rural areas (World Bank, 2021). Therefore,

digital literacy must be prioritized within empowerment strategies to ensure equitable participation in the 21st-century economy.

Furthermore, education’s transformative potential lies in its ability to cultivate critical consciousness—what Paulo Freire (1970) described as **conscientization**—enabling women to question and resist oppressive systems. This process transforms learners from passive recipients of knowledge to active agents of change. Empowered women, in turn, contribute to community development, policy reform, and sustainable governance.

To achieve this transformation, policies must go beyond expanding enrollment rates and focus on improving quality, safety, and inclusivity. Initiatives that integrate life skills, reproductive health education, and civic engagement create conditions for holistic empowerment. As Kumar (2025) and UN Women (2023) emphasize, education must not only open doors but also dismantle walls—structural, social, and psychological—that have historically limited women’s freedom.

In conclusion, education remains the most sustainable and democratic route to women’s empowerment. When it is inclusive, intersectional, and rights-based, education becomes a transformative force capable of reshaping societies and advancing the vision of gender justice embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Case Study: India and South Asia

India’s journey toward achieving gender equality in education illustrates both remarkable progress and persistent challenges. Since independence, education has been central to India’s nation-building agenda, with constitutional guarantees for equality and affirmative action policies. The Government of India’s initiatives such as **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)**, **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan**, and the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** have emphasized inclusive and equitable education as a pathway to women’s empowerment (Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020, in particular, envisions a “gender-inclusive curriculum” and a holistic learning model that links education with employability, critical thinking, and social transformation (Kumar, 2025).

Despite these efforts, gender disparities continue to hinder educational equity. According to UNICEF (2023), around 20% of adolescent girls in India drop out before completing secondary education, primarily due to early marriage, household responsibilities, and inadequate school infrastructure. Rural and marginalized communities—especially Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women—face compounded barriers that stem from socio-economic exclusion and gender norms (Kabeer, 2016). The feminization of unpaid domestic labor further constrains women’s participation in both education and employment (World Bank, 2021).

Kumar (2022) highlights that the real challenge lies not only in expanding access but also in transforming educational institutions into gender-just spaces. Schools often reflect the broader patriarchal and caste hierarchies of society, reinforcing rather than challenging gender stereotypes. Thus, implementing feminist pedagogy and community participation becomes essential for democratizing learning environments. Community-based interventions—such as women-led school management committees and mother-teacher associations—have proven effective in improving attendance, retention, and accountability in rural areas (Kumar, 2023).

South Asian counterparts such as Bangladesh and Nepal provide valuable lessons in designing localized, gender-responsive educational strategies. Bangladesh’s **Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP)**, for instance, offers stipends and tuition waivers to girls, resulting in significant improvements in female literacy and secondary school completion rates (ADB, 2021). Nepal’s **Education for All** framework integrates gender equity with social inclusion, targeting girls from remote and marginalized communities through scholarship schemes and flexible learning pathways (UNESCO, 2023).

Kumar (2022d) argues that such regional initiatives demonstrate the importance of combining education policy with financial inclusion and community mobilization. When families perceive education as a viable route to economic stability and social respect, girls’ enrollment and retention rise markedly. Furthermore, partnerships with NGOs and self-help groups across South Asia have facilitated women’s access to vocational training, digital literacy, and microfinance—factors that amplify empowerment beyond formal schooling.

Therefore, India’s educational future depends on strengthening these intersections—between state policy, local engagement, and gender-sensitive planning. South Asia’s experience reaffirms that achieving SDG 4 and SDG 5 requires not just top-down reforms but participatory, culturally grounded approaches that recognize women as active agents of change. Only then can education truly function as the foundation for equitable and sustainable development across the region.

Policy Implications and Strategies

Aligning education with women’s empowerment and the Sustainable Development Goals necessitates a multidimensional policy approach grounded in equity, inclusion, and innovation. While significant progress has been made in expanding access to education, structural inequalities continue to restrict women’s empowerment across the Global South. To overcome these challenges, policy frameworks must move beyond numerical targets toward systemic transformation that addresses the quality, relevance, and inclusivity of education (Kumar, 2025).

Gender-Responsive Curriculum

Curriculum reform is critical to dismantling gender stereotypes and cultivating equality-oriented values from an early age. Integrating subjects such as gender studies, human rights, and life skills into primary and tertiary education helps challenge patriarchal ideologies and build respect for diversity (Kumar, 2022b). UNESCO (2023) recommends embedding gender perspectives in textbooks, teacher training, and evaluation systems to promote empathy, civic responsibility, and leadership.

Digital Inclusion

Bridging the gender digital divide has become a key determinant of empowerment in the 21st century. Despite rapid technological advances, women—especially in rural India and South Asia—remain underrepresented in digital literacy programs. UN Women (2023) and Kumar (2022e) emphasize that affordable access to devices, digital

education, and safe online spaces can significantly enhance women's participation in the knowledge economy. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education also facilitates distance learning, which is vital in post-pandemic recovery and climate-affected regions.

Safety and Infrastructure

Gender-sensitive infrastructure is a prerequisite for equitable education. Lack of safe transportation, inadequate sanitation, and unsafe school environments often discourage girls from attending school, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas (UNICEF, 2023). Policymakers must prioritize the construction of gender-segregated sanitation facilities, ensure secure transport, and implement strict anti-harassment protocols. These measures not only improve enrollment and retention but also foster dignity and confidence among female learners.

Economic Support

Economic constraints remain a major barrier to women's education. Expanding scholarships, conditional cash transfers, and vocational training programs can significantly reduce dropout rates and encourage lifelong learning (World Bank, 2021). Kumar (2022e) suggests that such initiatives should be complemented by microfinance opportunities and employment linkages to ensure sustained empowerment. When women gain economic independence through education, they contribute directly to household stability and national productivity.

Leadership and Governance

Increasing women's representation in educational leadership, policy formulation, and research institutions is vital for sustaining gender equity. Kumar (2023) highlights those decision-making structures often exclude women's voices, resulting in policies that fail to address ground realities. Building mentorship programs, promoting women in school administration, and ensuring gender parity in academic appointments can help institutionalize equality and accountability within education systems.

In conclusion, aligning education with women’s empowerment and the SDGs requires coordinated action across government, academia, and civil society. A feminist, intersectional, and rights-based approach ensures that education becomes not merely a service but a transformative process. As Gurpinder Kumar and other scholars assert, when education empowers women, societies move closer to achieving sustainable development, democratic governance, and social justice.

Conclusion

Education forms the bedrock upon which gender equality and sustainable development are built. As both a human right and a social necessity, it empowers individuals, transforms communities, and strengthens democratic participation. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 5, education stands not only as an instrument of learning but also as a transformative force that enables women and girls to realize their full potential. However, achieving this vision requires more than universal access; it demands systemic reform, intersectional policy design, and continuous engagement with feminist pedagogies that address structural inequalities (UNESCO, 2023; UN Women, 2023).

The insights of scholars such as Gurpinder Kumar (2025, 2023, 2022a, 2022b, 2022d) underscore that education must transcend traditional notions of academic achievement to become a vehicle for social justice and empowerment. His research highlights that equitable education enhances women’s capacity to challenge patriarchal norms, participate in governance, and contribute to sustainable economies. Similarly, thinkers like Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2011), and Kabeer (2016) remind us that education cultivates the capabilities necessary for human flourishing—freedom, dignity, and agency. These frameworks collectively point to education’s moral, social, and economic dimensions, positioning it as a catalyst for transformative change.

In India and across South Asia, initiatives such as **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao**, **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan**, and community-based education models demonstrate that empowerment emerges when policy aligns with social mobilization and local participation. Yet,

persistent barriers—gender stereotypes, digital exclusion, and socio-economic disparities—continue to impede progress (Kumar, 2022d; World Bank, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires integrating feminist and rights-based approaches within education systems. This means fostering safe learning environments, gender-responsive curricula, and inclusive governance structures that promote leadership among women and girls.

Furthermore, the success of the SDGs depends on recognizing education not merely as one goal among seventeen, but as the foundation for achieving them all. When women are educated, they are better positioned to combat poverty, improve health outcomes, lead environmental initiatives, and influence policy decisions—creating a ripple effect that strengthens entire societies (UN, 2015; ADB, 2021).

Ultimately, the path toward sustainable and equitable development must be anchored in the empowerment of women through education. The vision articulated by Gurpinder Kumar and echoed in global frameworks reinforces that education is more than a developmental target—it is a transformative social contract. Ensuring that every woman and girl has the right and opportunity to learn, lead, and thrive is not only central to gender justice but essential to the collective future of humanity.

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ADDRESSING ABILITY-BASED DISCRIMINATION: - THE NEED OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS

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Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of modern educational systems, striving to provide equal opportunities for all students to reach their full potential. Despite significant progress, students with disabilities still face numerous social, psychological, and structural barriers that limit their participation and academic success. These barriers are often rooted in negative societal attitudes, inadequate support systems, and limited awareness of disability, which contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of students with disabilities.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right, and ensuring that all students—regardless of ability—have equitable access to quality education is essential. Inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities by promoting their academic and social development, but it also enhances the learning experiences of all students. By fostering diversity, empathy, and collaboration, inclusive classrooms contribute to the social cohesion of the broader school community. Despite the growing recognition of its importance, inclusive education remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas. These regions often face unique difficulties such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of trained professionals, exacerbating the barriers faced by students with disabilities. Consequently, these students frequently experience lower academic achievement, decreased self-esteem, and diminished life prospects compared to their peers. By examining the social and psychological barriers to inclusive education, this study aims to shed light on the need for targeted interventions and policies that ensure equal access to education for all students, with a particular focus on the challenges faced in rural areas. The findings of this study are intended to inform educators, policymakers, and community leaders about the strategies required to promote an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with disabilities.

Literature Review

Research has consistently shown that students with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing quality education. Social stigma,

inadequate support systems, and lack of understanding are just a few of the barriers that prevent students with disabilities from reaching their full potential.

Social stigma and negative attitudes towards disability are pervasive in educational settings, leading to marginalization, exclusion, and diminished learning outcomes (Katz, 2013; Rieser, 2006). Teachers' lack of understanding and training in disability support can further exacerbate these barriers (Florian, 2014). Inadequate support systems, including lack of accommodations, modifications, and assistive technology, hinder students' ability to access the curriculum (Ofiesh, 2006). Limited resources, particularly in rural areas, further compound these challenges (Loreman, 2017). Research has also highlighted the importance of inclusive education in promoting social cohesion, empathy, and diversity (Booth, 2011). Inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances the learning experience for all students (Vygotsky, 1978). Studies have shown that students with disabilities in inclusive settings have improved academic outcomes, increased self-esteem, and better social relationships (Hunt, 2011). However, the success of inclusive education depends on various factors, including teacher training, support systems, and school culture (Ainscow, 2012).

In conclusion, the literature highlights the complex interplay of factors that affect the education of students with disabilities. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that involves policy changes, teacher training, and support systems. By exploring the social and psychological barriers to inclusive education, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research in this field.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the social and psychological aspects of ability-based discrimination in rural areas, specifically in Canacona, Goa. The study aimed to investigate experiences of discrimination and identify potential solutions to promote inclusive education.

Participants

The study involved 150 participants, including 100 survey respondents (children with disabilities, parents, and educators), 20 in-depth interviewees (stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and community leaders), and 30 focus group participants (educators and policymakers).

Data Collection

- Survey: A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on experiences of discrimination, social stigma, and barriers to inclusive education.
- In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and suggestions for addressing ability-based discrimination.
- Focus Groups: Moderated discussions were held with educators and policymakers to explore their perspectives on inclusive education and strategies for promoting social change.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics to identify significant trends and patterns.
- Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes, categories, and patterns.

Instruments

- Survey questionnaire: A standardized tool was used to measure experiences of discrimination, social stigma, and barriers to inclusive education.
- Interview guide: A semi-structured guide was used to facilitate in-depth interviews.
- Focus group moderator guide: A structured guide was used to facilitate focus group discussions.

Procedure

- Data collection was conducted over a period of six months.
- Survey questionnaires were administered in person.
- In-depth interviews were conducted in person.
- Focus groups were conducted in person.

Ethics

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.
- Assistant District Educational Inspector's (ADEI's) approval was obtained.

By using a mixed-methods approach, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex issues surrounding ability-based discrimination in rural areas, ultimately informing strategies to promote inclusive education and social change.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis:-

1. Survey Findings:

The survey results revealed significant barriers and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing education and experiencing social inclusion. The key findings are:

- 80% of respondents encountered barriers in accessing education due to inadequate infrastructure, including inaccessible classrooms and lack of assistive technology.
- 70% of respondents reported feeling stigmatized by their community, leading to decreased self-esteem and confidence.
- 50% of respondents experienced discrimination due to their disability, with the most common forms being social exclusion (30%) and verbal abuse (20%).

2. In-Depth Interview Findings:

Stakeholders and policymakers highlighted the following key themes:

- Lack of trained educators and societal attitudes contribute significantly to ability-based discrimination.
- Inclusive education policies and community engagement are crucial for promoting social change and addressing systemic barriers.

3. Focus Group Findings:

Educators, policymakers, and stakeholders emphasized the following key points:

- Teacher training and community involvement are essential for promoting inclusive education.
- Accessible infrastructure and resources, including assistive technology and accommodations, are necessary to support students with disabilities.
- Addressing systemic barriers and promoting social change require collaborative efforts from educators, policymakers, and the community.

Qualitative Data Analysis:

- Themes emerged around the need for inclusive education policies, community engagement, and accessible infrastructure to address ability-based discrimination.
- Sub-themes included the importance of trained educators, societal attitude change, and empowerment of students with disabilities to advocate for their rights.

These findings highlight the complex and interconnected nature of ability-based discrimination in rural areas. The results inform the development of comprehensive strategies to address discrimination, including inclusive education policies, community engagement initiatives, and accessible infrastructure. By addressing these systemic barriers, we can promote social change and reduce discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

Ability-based discrimination is a pervasive issue in rural areas, affecting the education and well-being of individuals with disabilities. Systemic barriers, societal attitudes, and lack of resources perpetuate this discrimination.

Recommendations

1. **Inclusive Education Policies_:** Develop and implement policies promoting inclusive education, addressing systemic barriers, and ensuring equal access to education.
2. **Community Engagement_:** Engage with local communities to raise awareness, promote acceptance, and empower individuals with disabilities.
3. **Accessible Infrastructure_:** Invest in accessible infrastructure, including assistive technology and accommodations.
4. **Teacher Training_:** Provide educators with training to address diverse needs, promote inclusive learning environments, and use adaptive teaching methods.
5. **Empowerment_:** Empower individuals with disabilities to advocate for their rights, promote self-advocacy, and participate in decision-making processes.

Limitations and Future Research

- Reliance on self-reported data and potential social desirability bias

- Future research should employ diverse methodologies to validate findings and explore additional factors contributing to ability-based discrimination
- Investigate the effectiveness of inclusive education policies, community engagement initiatives, accessible infrastructure, and teacher training

Implications

- Practitioners: Recognize the importance of inclusive education and adapt teaching methods
- Policymakers: Develop and implement policies promoting inclusive education, addressing systemic barriers, and ensuring equal access
- Future Research: Investigate the impact of inclusive education on social change and equal opportunities

Addressing ability-based discrimination is crucial for promoting inclusive education, social change, and equal opportunities. Findings inform strategies for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to create more inclusive environments, reducing discrimination and promoting social justice. Continued research and efforts are needed to address the complex issues surrounding ability-based discrimination.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the pervasive nature of ability-based discrimination in rural areas, perpetuating systemic barriers to education for individuals with disabilities. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies to address this discrimination, including inclusive education policies, community engagement, accessible infrastructure, teacher training, and empowerment. By addressing these interconnected factors, we can promote inclusive education, social change, and equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of ability-based discrimination in rural areas, emphasizing the need for a multifaceted approach to address this complex issue. The recommendations provided offer a foundation for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to create more inclusive environments, ultimately reducing discrimination and promoting social justice.

As we move forward, it is crucial to recognize the importance of continued research and efforts to address ability-based discrimination. By working together, we can create a more inclusive society, where individuals with

disabilities have equal opportunities to reach their full potential. The time to act is now – let us work towards a future where every individual, regardless of ability, can thrive.

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UNPACKING THE NEP 2020: AND HIGHLIGHTING THE JOURNEY OF THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION: A REVIEW STUDY

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Education is vital for the progress of any nation. From Gurukul and ashrams to Tech classrooms, India has progressed a long way. Gone are the days of traditional chalkboards and rows of desks; now they are being replaced by smart classrooms which have emerged as innovative alternatives. The ongoing quest for quality, equity, and inclusivity remains at the heart of India's educational narrative. The current paper utilizes a review of literature methodology involving eleven studies (8 national,3 international). The studies were selected based on the following selection criteria; (a.) related to diversity (b.) studies related to equity (c.) related to inclusion with a focus on NEP2020.

The studies reviewed were ranging from 2023-2018. The study revealed that the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) in India highlights the significance of student-centered learning, while also noting challenges like insufficient resources and inadequate training that hinder the advancement of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs).

The results of the study clearly indicate the need to undertake a holistic approach as the studies mention lack of resources absence of curriculum adaptation and poor teacher skills levels as the major causes of lack of inclusive approach in educational organizations. By addressing these key factors, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that ensures equal access to education for all students, including those with disabilities.

It is suggested that overcoming these challenges can be achieved through innovative financing methods such as public-private

partnerships (PPP) and social bonds, which are vital for providing the necessary resources for successful implementation.

Keywords: *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Persons with Disability, Quality Education*

Introduction

“The destiny of a nation is shaped in its classrooms” (Kothari Commission 1964-66).

In Reshaping the education system of India and to cater to the distinct needs of our changing society, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a pivotal step (Mondal,2021). By focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion, NEP 2020 aims to transform education into a powerful tool for social change and empowerment. This policy recognizes the importance of addressing the needs of marginalized groups and ensuring that everyone has access to quality education. It seeks to create an educational environment that reflects India's rich diversity while providing equal opportunities for success. The paper discusses Inclusive Education in India, focusing on integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms and the historical policies supporting this initiative. As we delve into the evolution of education in India, it's evident that the principles of NEP 2020 are essential for building a more inclusive and equitable society, paving the way for a brighter future for all.

Revisiting Boundaries: The Intersection of Inclusion and Exclusion in Education

Equity in education refers to the principle of fairness, where every individual, from any background and community, has equal access to good educational opportunities. This is particularly important in a diverse nation like India, where socio-economic disparities often hinder educational opportunities for marginalized groups. The NEP 2020 seeks to bridge these gaps by implementing measures that promote equitable access to education, to make sure that all the students irrespective of their communities, should have equal opportunities to be successful. The policy aims to ensure universal access to high-quality education across all levels, highlighting the importance of

holistic development, adaptability, innovation, and the relevance of educational content (Biswas, 2020).

Diversity encompasses the variety of backgrounds, cultures, and abilities that exist within the educational landscape. In India, this diversity is reflected in its myriad languages, religions, and socio-economic conditions. The NEP 2020 recognizes this diversity as a strength and aims to create an inclusive curriculum that respects and integrates different perspectives.

Inclusion is the practice of creating an environment where all individuals, including persons with disabilities, feel valued and supported. The emphasis placed on inclusivity in educational settings highlights the importance of integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. This approach not only affords students with disabilities equal opportunities but also enriches the classroom environment by fostering empathy and understanding among all students.

Quality education is the cornerstone of the NEP 2020, focusing on enhancing learning outcomes and ensuring that education is relevant and meaningful. The policy seeks to enhance the quality of education through the implementation of innovative teaching strategies, the incorporation of technology, and the ongoing professional development of teachers. By focusing on high-quality education, NEP 2020 aims to enable all students, providing them with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in a globalized environment. (NEP, 2020)

Objective

To find out the role of NEP2020 in supporting inclusive education.

Research Question

How does NEP2020 support inclusive education?

Methodology

The current study includes a review of pertinent literature. A variety of research articles, journals, and blogs have been examined to establish the research objective.

Review of Literature

Kanungo S. S. (2024). This paper provides a critical assessment of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its potential contribution to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which focuses on Quality Education. It explores the historical development of India's education system, pointing out persistent issues such as access, equity, and rote learning. The policy advocates for a shift towards activity-based, student-centered learning to equip students with vital 21st-century skills. However, the successful execution of these initiatives faces obstacles, including limited resources and the need for innovative financing solutions. Public-private partnerships and alternative funding models, such as social impact bonds, present effective options for addressing these challenges. Furthermore, emphasizing teacher training is essential for the successful application of the new teaching strategies.

Aneraye, V.A. et. al. (2024). This study examines the impact of NEP 2020 on inclusive education for individuals with disabilities. The National Education Policy 2020 of the Indian government demonstrates a significant dedication to promoting inclusive education for people with impairments. The policy lays the groundwork for a more fair and inclusive educational system by tackling multiple challenges, including curriculum revisions, early childhood education, teacher training, assessment methods, support for special education, technology integration, and community involvement. For effective implementation, a comprehensive framework, proper execution, adequate resource distribution, and continuous monitoring and evaluation are essential. Recommendations emphasize that the effective application of the policy, suitable resource allocation, and ongoing assessment and monitoring are crucial for the successful realization of these inclusive measures. To foster an inclusive and supportive atmosphere that provides equal opportunities for every child, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, ongoing collaboration among educational stakeholders—such as schools, teachers, parents, and communities—is essential.

Praveen, B., & Dr. Abhishek N. (2024). This paper reviews NEP 2020's impact on higher education, highlighting its benefits and advancements. The policy advocates for the use of digital learning

resources to create personalized education and introduces a 5+3+3+4 system, which segments school years into foundational, preparatory, middle, and secondary phases. It encourages a multidisciplinary approach, allowing subject flexibility. However, challenges in implementation include infrastructure and resource issues. Institutions must align with NEP goals, focusing on autonomy and research. Additionally, there are gaps in monitoring progress and ensuring equitable access to technology across socio-economic backgrounds.

D, B. & Asif, N.(2023). This paper examines the state of disability-inclusive education in India, evaluating government initiatives aimed at supporting children with disabilities while identifying persistent challenges. The findings indicate that many educational institutions lack sufficient facilities, facing obstacles such as non-accessible infrastructure, societal prejudices, and inflexible curricula. The realization of effective inclusive education necessitates transformative shifts in attitudes, policies, and classroom methodologies. The recommendations are categorized into three levels: government policy, the education system, and schools/communities, specifying the distinct responsibilities of each within an Inclusive Education Best Practices Matrix.

Meisungdai, G. et.al. (2023). This review of NEP 2020 highlights challenges like insufficient teacher training and the potentially isolating school complex approach. Although it seeks to enhance inclusive education, it faces challenges in adequately meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The policy stresses equal opportunities but is unclear in its implementation. To enhance NEP 2020, the government should focus on marginalized groups, ensuring teachers are well-trained to support diverse learners. Monitoring the implementation of recommendations is also essential to meet the goals of inclusive education. By addressing these issues, NEP 2020 can create a more equitable educational landscape in India.

Kumar, D., & Singh, M. (2022). This paper investigates the components of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 that pertain to divyangjan, stressing the importance of providing barrier-free education to enable their integration into mainstream learning. NEP 2020 effectively addresses the challenges faced by women, minorities, and children with special needs, proposing measures like education

SEZs to tackle structural issues in inaccessible areas. However, it overlooks the specific challenges faced by historical groups like Dalits and Adivasis. Recommendations include enhancing physical infrastructure and resources for students with special needs, training instructors to effectively use various aids and tools, and organizing workshops on important days like World Disability Day to raise awareness about the potential of divyangjan.

Suthar, A.F. & Patel, R.B. (2021). In this research, we explore the educational landscape in India and also highlight emerging challenges and issues within the education sector. The results indicate that quality education has a direct impact on the overall growth of a nation and positions the country favorably on a global scale. Over the past seventy years, higher education in India has significantly expanded in terms of quantity. Nevertheless, we still fall short in achieving the expected quality of education. To enhance the quality of education, relevant experts need to consider various parameters such as adequate infrastructure, updated curricula, skilled instructors, educational resources, financial support, and well-structured guidelines. Additionally, reducing class sizes can allow teachers to provide more focused attention to each student.

Shokeen, N. (2021). This paper revisits Mary Douglas's idea of dirt as a 'matter out of place' to show how purity and danger can turn inclusionary efforts into exclusionary practices against marginalized groups. It also draws on Julia Kristeva's theory of Abjection to discuss ways to 'clean up' the education system. Incorporating multicultural experiences can create space for diverse voices, fostering tolerance and creativity among students. This approach can lead to an inclusive education system that promotes social mobility and supports the goal of universal education. The paper highlights how these exclusionary pressures can arise from displacement strategies.

Kumar, M. (2021). This review analyzes the effects of NEP 2020 on inclusive education. Key findings indicate that teachers will be required to obtain a four-year B.Ed degree by 2030, and there is a target for achieving universal education from Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to secondary levels by the same year, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4. A National Mission will prioritize foundational learning and numeracy skills by 2025, aiming for a 100%

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) from preschool through secondary education. There are also plans to reintegrate 2 crore out-of-school children, with teachers expected to adapt to assessment reforms by 2023. The policy aspires to establish an inclusive education system by 2030, with board exams focusing on essential concepts and practical skills. Common learning standards will be established for both public and private schools.

Ahmad, W. (2018). This study explores the barriers to accessibility in higher education for individuals with disabilities (PwDs) in India. Despite a significant increase in student enrollment since the 1980s, financial support has diminished, which has limited accessibility in universities. Numerous institutions do not comply with fundamental accessibility requirements, and there remains a disconnect between established policies and their implementation. The study advocates for improvements in online accessibility, the adoption of assistive technologies, flexible examination methods, and the use of open educational resources to aid PwDs. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity for increased funding to enable institutions to foster inclusive environments, equipping PwDs with the tools needed to encourage their independence and success.

Findings

- **Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**

NEP 2020 supports UN SDG 4 by advancing quality, inclusive education through the modernization of curricula, experiential learning, and the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills by 2025. Successfully executing these goals demands significant resources, creative financing solutions, and adequately trained educators.

- **Inclusive Education for Disabilities:**

NEP 2020 is making notable progress in aiding students with disabilities by updating the curriculum, providing teacher training, and enhancing infrastructure accessibility. Nevertheless, obstacles persist, including a lack of resources and societal biases. Proposed solutions involve establishing public-private partnerships, offering specialized

training for teachers in inclusive methodologies, and overseeing the implementation of policies to guarantee inclusiveness.

- **Barriers to Access and Equity:**

Despite the commitments made by the NEP, restrictions due to infrastructure limitations and societal biases still hinder access, particularly for students with disabilities and marginalized groups such as Dalits and Adivasis. Suggestions for enhancement involve improving physical infrastructure, implementing assistive technologies, and conducting awareness workshops to tackle these issues.

- **Challenges in Implementation:**

The success of NEP 2020 encounters challenges such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and poor infrastructure. To achieve the desired quality standards and ensure the effectiveness of policies, it is crucial to implement structural enhancements, adaptable curricula, and proper funding.

- **Multicultural and Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches:**

Emphasizing the inclusion of multicultural experiences and viewpoints promotes both tolerance and creativity. Tackling cultural biases and "exclusionary practices" in education through inclusive teaching methods enhances social mobility and supports the objective of universal education.

- **Innovative and Interdisciplinary Learning:**

The National Education Policy (NEP) promotes digital learning and a multidisciplinary strategy, aiming to tailor education to individual needs and support flexible educational pathways. Nevertheless, unequal access to technology continues to pose a challenge, highlighting the need for initiatives that promote fair technology distribution among various socio-economic groups.

Conclusion

Education is indeed a cornerstone for the development of any nation, and your summary captures the evolution of India's educational

landscape very well. From the traditional Gurukul system to the modern tech-driven classrooms, the shift reflects a significant transformation aimed at enhancing learning experiences. The focus on learner-centered education in the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is vital, particularly in catering to the requirements of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Your findings highlight the persistent challenges like limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and a lack of curriculum adaptation, which hinder the progress towards an inclusive education system. The recommendations outlined, such as leveraging public-private partnerships and improving teacher remuneration and professional development, are vital steps. These approaches can create a more interactive learning atmosphere and guarantee that every student, irrespective of their abilities, has fair access to education. Implementing skill development programs centered on inclusive education is crucial for providing educators with the skills needed to effectively support diverse learners. In conclusion, these findings emphasize the value of a well-rounded approach to education that focuses on inclusivity and fairness, leading to a more supportive educational environment in India.

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RE-ENGINEERING EDUCATION: CREATING AGILE LEARNERS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

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This essay highlights the urgent need to transform education systems to prepare students for a rapidly evolving, technology-driven economy. Traditional industrial-era models are inadequate in addressing the demands of AI-driven workplaces. The paper advocates for integrating technical expertise with soft skills – such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving – to create agile learners capable of thriving in dynamic environments.

It critiques standardized, subject-focused curricula and testing methods for stifling creativity and failing to address interdisciplinary challenges. Instead, it calls for experiential learning frameworks, project-based assessments, and holistic progress cards, aligning with India's National Education Policy 2020. The essay emphasizes the importance of balancing STEM proficiency with human-centric skills to foster adaptability and occupational mobility. Recognizing the necessity of lifelong learning, it proposes mechanisms such as micro-credentials, employer-sponsored training, and government incentives to support continuous skill development. Educators play a pivotal role in this transformation by reskilling and upskilling themselves to teach interdisciplinary concepts effectively.

Introduction

Goldman Sachs predicts that 300 million jobs could be impacted globally by 2025 because of advancements in AI and automation.¹ As industries get reshaped and impacted due to rapid developments in technology, the education system must be reimaged to prepare

¹ AIPRM. "50+ AI Replacing Jobs Statistics 2024 · AIPRM." AIPRM: Your Cheat Code for AI Like ChatGPT, Claude & Midjourney · AIPRM. Last modified July 11, 2024. <https://www.aiprm.com/ai-replacing-jobs-statistics/>.

students for a future where technical expertise is increasingly commoditized, and job requirements are changing at a faster pace than ever. This calls for integrating soft skills in curriculum design while reviewing outdated assessments, pedagogy, and accreditation. The education system must reorient from rigid subjects and standardized testing to more interdisciplinary, experiential learning frameworks of lifelong learning.

Historical Context of Education Systems

Modern education originated in the late 19th century during the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society. The Committee of Ten, a group of American educators, designed a standardized high school curriculum with separate subjects like mathematics, history, and languages to meet industrial needs.² A factory model of education was established, and the approach was standardized and efficient, akin to an assembly line production system to prepare students for repetitive, task-oriented jobs.³ Although this model was effective in equipping the student with the basic literacy and numeracy, it is becoming outdated as automation and AI transform the nature of work. This inflexible and linear nature of the education system neglects the interdisciplinary and dynamic environment that students will soon find themselves in.

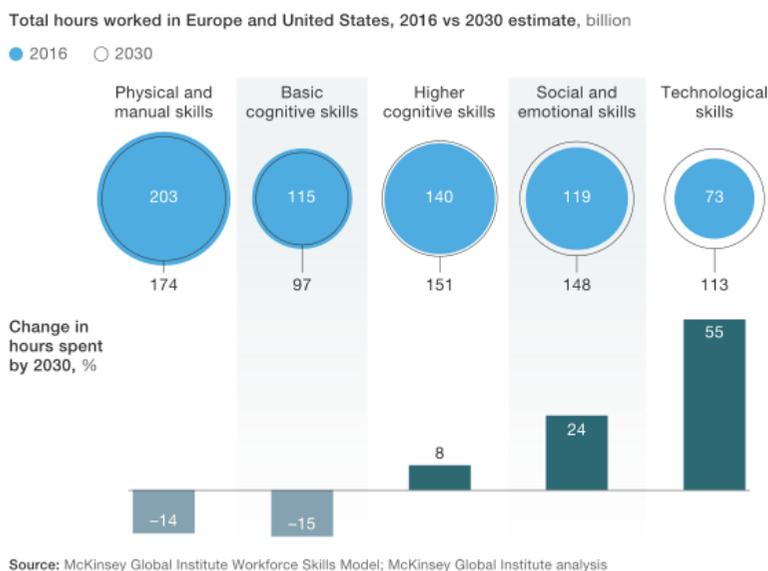
Needs of the New-Age Economy

The modern economy, driven by rapid technological advances, demands a new blend of skills. According to McKinsey, success now hinges on a combination of technical and soft skills. While technical skills, especially in STEM, are vital for productivity, soft skills are

² National Education Association of the United States. Committee on Secondary School Studies, *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies [appointed at the Meeting of the National Educational Association July 9, 1892: With the Reports of the Conferences Arranged by this Committee and Held December 28-30, 1892]* (1893), 43.

³ H. P. Baptiste and C. Sleeter, *Multicultural Education: A Renewed Paradigm of Transformation and Call to Action* (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 2015), 115-136.

equally important in creating an adaptable workforce. Orienting the education system around STEM increases the marginal product of labor, which, according to the Marginal Productivity Theory of Wages, leads to higher wages and consequently higher economic output.⁴ It also addresses the projected 3.5 million skilled labor gap in STEM sectors in the US by 2025, helping reduce structural unemployment caused by a mismatch between workers' skills and job requirements.⁵ By equipping future employees with the technical skills to effectively leverage AI, economies can operate closer to their full capacity.



McKinsey&Company

Figure 1⁶

⁴ Daniel Hamermesh, "The Demand for Labor in the Long Run," 1984, 1, doi:10.3386/w1297.

⁵ Deloitte AI Institute, *Inspiring STEM learning and careers with AI*, (Deloitte, 2021), <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/consulting/articles/stem-diversity-inclusion.html>.

⁶ Jacques Bughin et al., *Skill Shift Automation and the Future of the Workforce*, (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018), <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/skill-shift-automation-and-the-future-of-the-workforce>.

However, reliance on technological specialization also exposes workers to the risk of creative destruction, a concept developed by economist Joseph Schumpeter. It refers to the process through which innovation leads to the demise of older technologies and the skills associated with them. In an economy increasingly driven by technological advancements, workers who specialize in specific technologies may find their skills rendered obsolete, leading to structural unemployment. This is where soft skills become important, as workers will need to be adaptable in moving between industries and jobs with the advancement of technology.

Orienting the educational system toward the development of soft skills is critical in workers' ability to adjust to a rapidly evolving, technology-driven economy. A study conducted on Hungarian white-collar workers and managers revealed that complex problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability —essential soft skills— are strong indicators of employees' preparedness to embrace digital technologies.⁷ This adaptability, also known as occupational labor mobility, is crucial as workers transition between jobs and industries in response to changes in technology. Greater flexibility improves labor market fluidity, which flattens the Phillips Curve, allowing the economy to sustain higher output and lower unemployment without prompting significant inflation.

As AI and automation achieve levels that mirror or surpass human capabilities in most technical tasks, the significance of human-centric abilities, especially soft skills, has become increasingly apparent. Human beings have a comparative advantage over machines in activities that require emotional intelligence, adaptability, and effective problem-solving. The development of soft skills equips employees to work synergistically with AI rather than competing with it. This can be evidenced in trends for wages in Figure 2, where workers possessing higher social skills have achieved dramatic growth in wages compared

⁷ Nóra Obermayer et al., "Importance of digital and soft skills in the digital age," European Conference on Knowledge Management 24, no. 2 (2023): doi:10.34190/eckm.24.2.1550.

to those with weak social skills. In fact, Deloitte estimates that, by 2030, two-thirds of all jobs will be soft skill-intensive occupations.⁸

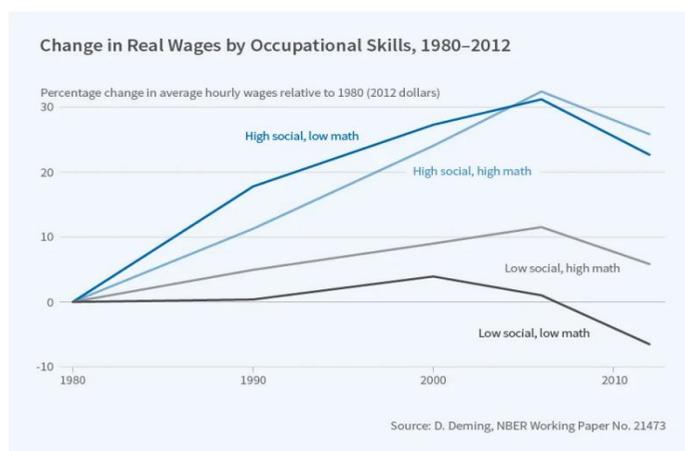


Figure 2⁹

Beyond Traditional Academic Disciplines

Academic disciplines have long served as the core structure for school curricula. However, as students gear up for a future shaped by automation and technological advancements, a more effective approach may be to organize education around soft skills and ways of thinking rather than conventional subject boundaries. Such a model would foster skills like systems thinking, design thinking, communication, leadership among others. Within each of those courses, students would look at interrelated ideas related to a wide range of disciplines.

As innovation cycles shorten and knowledge quickly becomes outdated due to the accelerating pace of discovery, the essence of education should shift from simply acquiring information to developing soft skills. These skills, which enable workers to adapt to change and

⁸ Deloitte Access Economics, *Soft skills for business success*, (2017), <https://www.deloitte.com/au/en/services/economics/perspectives/soft-skills-business-success.html>.

⁹ D. Deming, "The Growing Importance of Social Skills, NBER Working Paper 21473," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132, no. 4 (June 2017): 1637.

navigate complex challenges, remain relevant regardless of technological shifts. While a solid understanding of STEM subjects is necessary for knowing the tools of technology, it is the development of soft skills that shows workers how to apply these tools in innovative, impactful ways.

Increasingly, workplaces require employees to solve problems that are multifaceted and span various industries. For instance, tackling climate change requires knowledge from STEM subjects like chemistry, biology, and physics, but also social sciences like economics and politics. Teaching subjects in silos, as is common in today's education system, fails to reflect the interconnected nature of these real-world challenges. Ambrose's pedagogical theory of cognitivism highlights the importance of building mental maps that establish meaningful connections between concepts.¹⁰ Integrating diverse subjects into skill-based courses can foster connected understanding, better equipping students to solve complex, real-world problems.

Measuring What Matters

Policymakers need to fundamentally rethink how to assess student learning. Current systems heavily rely on standardized testing, which, while measurable, often succumbs to Goodhart's Law – the idea that when a metric becomes a target, it stops being a reliable measure.¹¹ In the context of standardized testing, this means that when educational institutions prioritize test scores as a measure of student success, they may inadvertently encourage behaviors that prioritize test preparation over genuine learning. Students may resort to rote memorization and test-taking strategies rather than developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This focus on quantifiable metrics can lead to a narrow educational experience that does not adequately prepare students for real-world challenges.

¹⁰ Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 44.

¹¹ C. A. Goodhart, "Problems of Monetary Management: The UK Experience," *Monetary Theory and Practice*, 1984, 91, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-17295-5_4.

Policymakers and institutions should adopt a system of paired metrics, an approach championed by former Intel CEO Andy Grove, where the second metric is introduced to address the negative consequences of the first one.¹² Complementing standardized testing with project-based learning would lead to a better evaluation of student capabilities. Project-based learning not only evaluates essential soft skills like teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, but also encourages deeper learning. The application of knowledge promotes the “transfer” of learning and fosters “mastery,” aligning with Ambrose’s theory of effective learning.¹³ India’s National Education Policy 2020 reflects this shift by advocating for a “holistic progress card” that measures both soft and hard skills through a mix of project-based and test-based assessments. Additionally, the NEP promotes flexibility in curriculum design, allowing students to choose subjects based on their interests and career aspirations. It also emphasizes the integration of technology in teaching and learning to enhance educational delivery.¹⁴ To prepare students for the fast-evolving job market, institutions should prioritize experiential learning that aligns with Blikstein’s constructionist model, which emphasizes learning through real-world experiences.¹⁵ This approach will help graduates become more adaptable and better equipped to thrive in industries influenced by automation. In today’s builder economy, where creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation are highly valued, this kind of learning is especially crucial.

Central to this transformation in learning process are the educators, who will play a pivotal role in equipping students not only with technical proficiency but also with the essential soft skills needed to thrive in the digital era. Since most educators might have been trained in traditional systems where soft skills were often overlooked, the

¹² Andrew S. Grove, *High Output Management* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 17.

¹³ Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 91-121.

¹⁴ Government of India, *National Education Policy*, (2020).

¹⁵ Paulo Blikstein, "Travels in Troy with Freire," *Social Justice Education for Teachers*, 2008, 206, doi:10.1163/9789460911446_015.

process must begin with reskilling and upskilling the educators themselves.

Micro-Learning for a Dynamic Workforce

In a world where technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace, the traditional notion of a student – someone who spends a finite number of years in school before entering the workforce – is outdated. Today’s workers must be lifelong learners. Current methods involve employer-sponsored training programs, designated professional development days, and access to online courses. However, these initiatives seem insufficiently integrated into the everyday work life, often treated as optional extras rather than essential components of a sustainable career.

One way to support lifelong learning is by providing paid time off for workers to pursue educational opportunities. This could be incentivized through government policies that encourage businesses to invest in their employees’ ongoing education. Governments could also promote micro-accreditation, allowing workers to earn smaller, more targeted qualifications throughout their careers, rather than requiring them to commit to long-term degree programs. In 2022, the EU passed the “Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability” to enable institutions and businesses to develop, implement, and recognize micro-credentials.¹⁶ These programs should not only focus on technical skills but also prioritize the development of soft skills – such as communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence – which are increasingly critical in the modern workplaces.

Conclusion

The workforce of the future will be more fluid, with careers spanning multiple industries and roles. As AI and automation continue to transform the job market, the cultivation of soft skills will become increasingly critical for professionals looking to future-proof their careers. A holistic education model is required that integrates STEM

¹⁶ European Union, *Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*, (2022), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H0627\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H0627(02)).

with soft skills, interdisciplinary thinking, real-world application, and life-long learning. Ultimately, the future workforce will need to collaborate with machines, however it is our unique human skills that will define the direction of that partnership.

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REMEMBERING PROF. GIRIJA GUPTA
(5-12-1963 TO 26-12-2025)

Prof. Vibhuti Patel,
Trustee, Indian Council of Basic Education,
Mumbai



Prof. Girija Gupta passed too soon. Her untimely demise has caused a great loss to the academia and social movements directed at justice and rights of the marginalised and socially excluded communities. She dedicated her life to academic excellence as a teacher of sociology at Sathye College, Vile Parle, Mumbai and various social causes from housing rights of the toiling poor at the bottom of the urban economy, contract workers at the airport, women's rights struggles and progressive cultural movement. Girija ji was gifted with multifaceted, intellectually sharp and electrifying persona. Her signature smile energized all around her to make positive contribution to the society. She led a purposeful, productive and principles life. Fragrance of her highly inspiring & beautiful persona will always uplift our spirit. I feel honoured that she gave me several opportunities to conduct online sessions for the courses curated by her on Public Policy, Constitutional Rights and Gender Equality. She beautifully sang the songs of social causes in her powerful voice. During 1980s Girija was actively involved in the programmes of *Stree Kriti* and *Navnirman Sanskritik Manch*. As a teacher, she inspired her students to think out of box and be reflective. Hers was an open house and all were welcomed by both

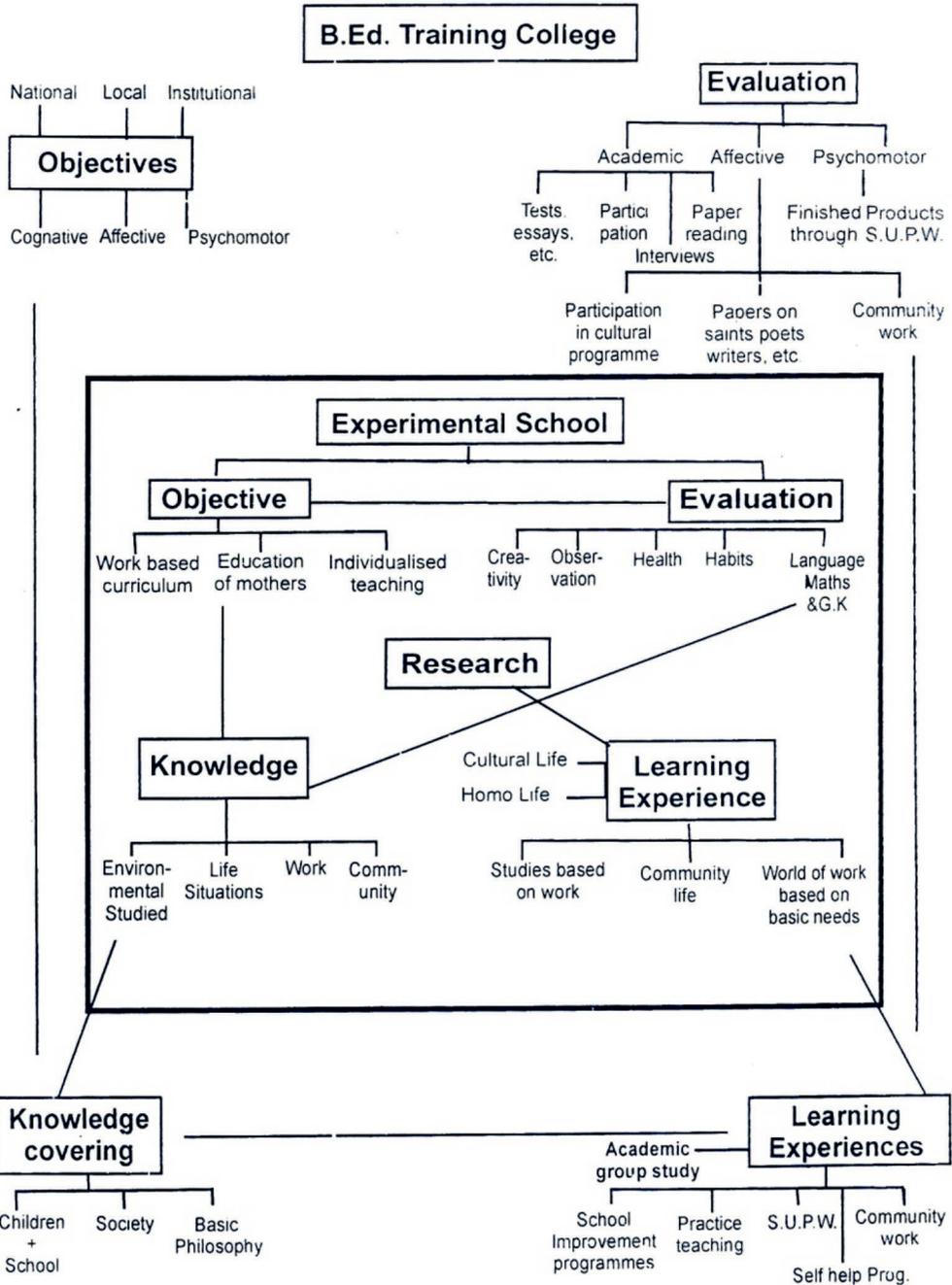
her father, Shri. Vasant Gupte and Girija who also offered warm hospitality. Her commitment to women's studies and women's rights was found in her writings as well as her praxis. With Prof. Chhaya Datar, she coauthored a primary research based book, *Reform?, Or, New Form Of Patriarchy? Devadasis In Border Region Of Maharashtra and Karnataka (1991, TISS. Mumbai).*

Girija ji's sister, Dr. Manisha Gupte informed, "Girija comes from a background of three generations of social activism, from her paternal grandfather who reduced his law practice to become part of the pre-independence Congress, her uncle who was imprisoned during the freedom struggle, her aunts and uncles who were part of the '*Prabhat Pheris*' pre-independence, and her freedom fighter parents who met in the socialist trade union. Her father, Vasant Gupte was a full-timer of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha until his death, and for decades its National Secretary. He practiced law only as a union representative. Both her parents were active in anti-Emergency work in the 1970s. Her hospitality, generosity and compassion stayed with her until the end. Every friend and comrade remembers her as a kind and fun-loving person, and have shared stories of how she went out of her way to show solidarity and love for her colleagues. There wasn't a single complaint or "Why Me?" question in her mind in spite of increasing immobility and discomfort due to kidney and heart damage precipitated by long-term diabetes."

Animated conversations, passionate discussions and humorous remarks of Prof. Girija Gupte will be missed greatly. She will be remembered by her clarion call of her signature song, '*Uth Jaag Meri Behna, Ru Maan Mera Kehna; Ab Julma Nahi Sehana*' (Wake up my sister, Please accept what I say, DON'T PUT UP WITH TYRANNY & CRUELTY). Her legacy of social solidarity will be continued by her students, colleagues, activists, friends and their children. Rest in peace and power, Prof. Girija Gupte.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE MODEL

SOURCES

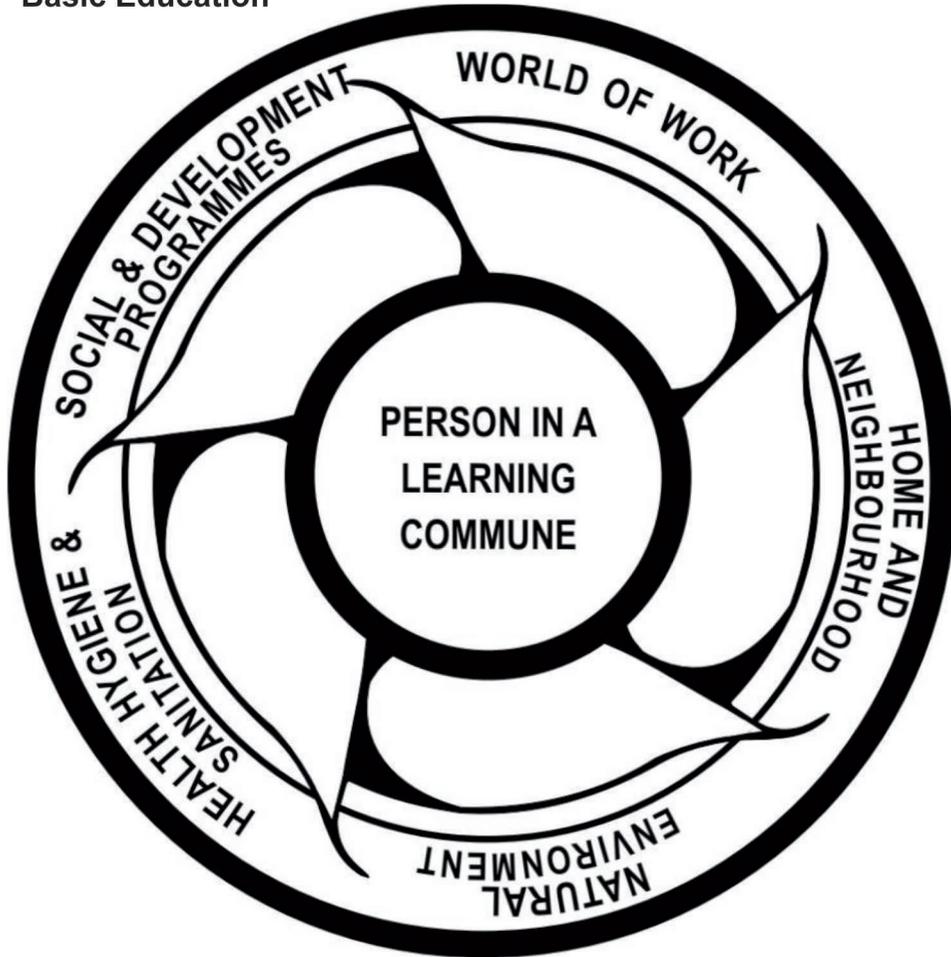


GANDHI SHIKSHAN BHAVAN

Functional Education

Indian Council of
Basic Education

Regd. No. 9331/64



Development of well-integrate personality is possible if :

- a. Educational experiences and work experiences interweave, intersect and reinforce each other.
- b. Students and teachers participate actively in the community services such as adult education, promotion of better health, hygiene and sanitation etc.
- c. Curriculum provides for self-directed learning and
- d. Education concerns itself with the development of the human person.

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