



Re-visiting the Delors Report: Lessons for India

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At a time when the education system in India is on the cusp of undergoing reforms and when policy recommendations emerging from diverse sources with their competing claims are more likely to confuse rather than clarify or guide, it is worthwhile revisiting the Delors report titled “Learning: The Treasure Within” (1996) for its sharp analysis of prevailing educational challenges and the role of education in personal and social development. UNESCO constituted an International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century under the chairmanship of Jacques Delors, to examine realities and propose how education systems could address learning concerns that would surface in the new century. This exercise needs to be seen as a continuation of international efforts starting with the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) at Jomtein, which emphasised the importance of education in reducing world poverty, ignorance, exclusion, oppression and war and helping attain peace, freedom and social justice. After over a decade and half into the new century, it is time that we review the main observations of this important report and understand how they are relevant in guiding us through the policy flux in the present-day Indian education sector.

Building learning societies

The Delors report underlined that learning how to learn forms the essence of building learning societies where each individual would be in turn both a teacher and a learner. It built on the earlier UNESCO report titled “Learning to Be” (1972) prepared under the chairpersonship of Edgar Faure, and undertook the difficult task of drawing universally valid conclusions and recommendations that could be applied nationally. It offered some fresh perspectives, such as looking at education as an ‘expression of affection for children and young people, whom we need to welcome into society, unreservedly offering them the place that is theirs by right therein’ (page 12). It upheld the primacy of the formal education system and the significant role of the teacher by observing, ‘nothing can replace the formal education system, where each individual is introduced to the many forms of knowledge’ (page 19) and that ‘there is no substitute for a teacher-pupil relationship’ (page 19) and a teacher whose is

responsible ‘to impart to the pupil the knowledge that humankind has acquired about itself and about nature and everything of importance that it has created and invented’ (page 20). One of the main tasks of the report was to emphasise the importance of lifelong education and ‘the need to advance towards a learning society’. The title of the Delors report is drawn from its main proposition that ‘none of the talents which are hidden like buried treasure in every person must be left untapped’ (page 21). These include potentials of memory, reasoning power, imagination, physical ability, aesthetic sense, aptitude to communicate with others, leadership and other such qualities.

The report identifies seven ‘tensions’ that must be overcome in the twenty-first century and proposed four pillars that would help to build learning societies (see Boxes 1 and 2). These are considered to be the key highlights of the report. The report talks of a vision of sustainable human development, democracy and mutual understanding and, towards this end, it identifies the seven tensions that must be overcome. Without suggesting any pathways to actually surmount these tensions, the report alludes to the various factors contributing to the tensions that must be dealt with by policy makers. Among the four pillars, the report specifies ‘learning to live together’ as the most critical pillar in ushering a ‘new spirit’ and for greater common understanding and fostering interdependence. The other three pillars, ‘learning to know’, ‘learning to do’ and ‘learning to be’ are visualised as providing bases for ‘learning to live together’.

Tensions to Overcome

1. The Global and The Local
2. The Universal and the Individual
3. Tradition and Modernity
4. Long term and Short term considerations
5. Need for competition and the Concern for Equality of Opportunity
6. The extraordinary expansion of knowledge and human beings’ capacity to assimilate it
7. The Spiritual and the Material

Box 1

Four Pillars to Build Learning Societies		
1.	Learning to know	Includes breadth, depth of knowledge, learning to learn
2.	Learning to do	Includes acquisition of occupational and social skills
3.	Learning to live together	Includes appreciation of interdependence
4.	Learning to be	Includes ability to act with personal autonomy, judgment and responsibility

Box 2

Relevance to policy context in India

Despite its valuable critique and recommendations, the Delors report did not receive much attention from the academic community or policy makers. This could have been due to the fact that India was going through a different set of struggles and changes during the mid-nineties, which included adoption of new externally funded mission mode programmes for meeting the goals of universal education, reforms in education governance, decentralisation and opening of education sector for public- private partnerships. Delors report did not appeal to these basic challenges and hence failed to make a dent on the policy agenda. The question that we need to ask is, are we now ready to engage with the vision of learning societies and the larger aims of education as proposed by the Delors report?

The contributions of this report have a strong bearing on the way education systems need to be organised in this rapidly changing globalised societies. Engagement with these ideas at a policy level would entail reviewing the aims of education, philosophies of education, curriculum, language, and pedagogical tools used. Rather than a piecemeal approach, it would require laying down of a new policy on education which simultaneously builds on relevant ideas from the earlier policies that have been neglected or partially implemented and is also forward looking, going beyond the immediate challenges.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) broadly refers to both the 'tensions' and 'pillars' in various ways. The tension of balancing the global and the local in the curricular objectives and the challenge of assimilation in face of rapidly expanding knowledge have been acknowledged not only by the policy makers in the NCF but also by teachers and educational practitioners.

The challenge of preserving the individual and traditional systems in the face of universal and modern pressures has been confronted by those working at the grassroots, especially with regards to preservation of languages, local culture, arts, crafts, and traditional skills. The tension between promoting competition and equality of opportunity keeps surfacing as a contentious issue, especially in higher education, although the Indian Constitution provides for affirmative action and equality of opportunity.

The balancing between the long term and short term goals is a another 'tension' which policy makers continuously grapple with, given that political contestation often tends to prioritise short term issues and agendas. Long term goals of education tend to border on rhetoric if not accompanied by concrete operational road maps and hence fail to catch the imagination and enrol support of political constituencies. As a result, any policy making exercise, although inherently meant to guide future directions, does not in reality go far beyond alleviating the immediate pressures. It is important to ensure that the tensions do not get seen as a menu of extreme positions, as 'either-or' propositions, but are understood as a continuum with the challenge being to constantly negotiate and locate one's position on the continuum. There may also be a need to articulate whether these broad contours on the continuum be decided through an official policy that would be binding on different state and non-state actors or if various positions on the continuum are offered as a menu of options, with the choice lying with parents on how to mix between these competing choices or the 'tensions'.

In other words, should the policy prescribe the extent to which curricula should be global versus local or should various providers be free

to make their offerings as per their convictions and aims about the 'global' and 'local' and leave it to the parents or students to choose what kind of education they would like to receive. It is also important to recognise that the tensions are directly or indirectly inter-related and decisions made with regards to one may affect how other tensions are negotiated.

While the NCF alludes to the four pillars proposed in Delors report, it must be noted that among them, the report identified 'learning to live together' as a key pillar that needs to be built for meeting global challenges of the twenty-first century, with other three pillars- learning to know, to do, and to be, providing bases for the same. The translation of this holistic understanding of learning is hardly found in the way our education system has been organised. Even the narrow focus on knowledge is limited to preparing students to gather more and more information, rather than 'learning' to know and learning how to learn. The other pillars related to learning skills and realising one's potentials remain largely ignored. The most important pillar as per the report, which focuses on learning to build solidarity and live together, seems to be outside the framework of our current education system, perhaps due to its significant political overtones compared to the other three pillars. A pertinent question that needs to be raised here is what aspirational value do these four pillars bring to our

understanding of learning and aims of education.

Some of the policy proposals of the MHRD note on inputs of the proposed National Education Policy also resonates with the recommendations of the Delors report. The vision outlined in the note refers to the urgency to meet global demands while protecting the locally rich heritage and ancient knowledge systems. It aims at responding to the fast-changing global, knowledge- based economy while professing goals of equity and inclusion. Although not indicated as a tension, the policy note pushes for both knowledge and skill development. The goal of lifelong learning is also endorsed in the policy note which states that educational opportunities should be made available to all segments of the society.

Summing up this reflection on the relevance and insights of the Delors report, it would be useful to recall that the education system has undergone some slow, yet definite, changes in recent times. While it continues to grapple with myriad issues and challenges not very different from those faced by other countries, it would be useful to take note of the contributions of this report. Instead of dismissing it for its high rhetoric, it is time that the education community places these questions on the table and examines closely how these ideas can help shape our education system and what we think deserves to be actually learnt.