

Invasion of Educational Universe by Neo-liberal Economic Thinking

A Civilisational Casualty?

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The early 1960s witnessed attempts at constrictive reinterpretation of the role and purpose of education in terms of ideological premises, concepts and methodology of neoclassical economics, with “economics of education” being founded. In this newly-founded economic discourse, education is seen as a vehicle for “human capital formation”, a key both to avowed growth of aggregate economy and to upward economic mobility of individuals/households. An increasing dominance of this narrow neo-liberal view of education has undermined the long-standing hold of the pre-existing vision and liberal view of education wherein it is a means not only to material progress but also to higher level of civilisational ethos, enlightenment and democratic citizenship.

The broad object of the present paper is to present an overview of the major (post-second world war) trends and features of the neo-liberal (economic) thinking and policy in the sphere of education and their current and/or future ramifications for the civilisational progression that had kept flowing through the ages of Renaissance, Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.¹ More specifically, the early 1960s witnessed the somewhat abrupt emergence of a constricted (virtually one-dimensional) reinterpretation of the role and purpose of education predominantly in terms of the objectives, categories and methodology of the mainstream (neoclassical) economics. This soon culminated in the founding of a new branch of mainstream economics, namely, “economics of education”. An increasing sway of the latter nearly to the point of hegemony has eventually undermined, if not dislodged, the pre-existing humanistic vision and liberal view of education in which education is considered as a vehicle for moving forward not only to a higher material level but also – through its cultivation of original knowledge, objective scholarship, critical and perceptive thinking, creative imagination, democratic ideals – to a higher level of enlightenment, civilisational ethos, and citizenship.

The latter’s waning hold, as would be argued, has brought in its wake an increasingly manifest dissonance, namely, between rapid technological/material advancement and a lagging pace and pattern of ideational, humanistic, and intellectual standard and progress. And, as our argument goes, this (admittedly) “unholy” trend, if unchallenged for long, can increasingly land our global civilisation into a major crisis not exactly or immediately in the spheres of material living, comforts, and technology, but in terms of a deepening debilitation of academic standard, rigour, sanctity, and related intellectual, ideational, ideological vibrancy crucial for the sustenance of the perennial process of civilisational progression. We better begin by spelling out the basic premise on which our argument is designed to rest rather heavily.

The Premise

That education is a prime instrument or vehicle for modern industrial and technological progress and related material achievements is a commonplace for long and especially since the Industrial Revolution. It is largely through education that the modern industrial civilisation ensures sustained supplies of necessary skills, expertise, and professionals who could not

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only make possible the production of ever newer commodities, comforts of life, and hence persistent improvements in material standard of living but also keep up fundamental scientific inventions, technological progress and innovations and growth of productivity. Education has long been nurtured as a self-enlivening mainspring of creative intellectual impulse and/or enlightened urge for objective search for truth and knowledge, making possible an inexorable flow of scientific inventions, technological, intellectual and social progress. The prominent “breeding place” of such precious impulse and inspiration for exploring the “new” and “more efficient” has been seats of academic research (e.g., universities and colleges) liberally patronised and exhaustively supported – but hardly dictated or unduly interfered – by the state.²

Educational values received by academic scientists over the preceding centuries designed them to be driven not by the prospect or incentives for big pecuniary largesse and wealth, but by a deep potential feeling of accomplishment/self-esteem obtaining at the moment of their new inventions or intellectual breakthroughs. It is hard to deny that any new intellectual invention or original creation or discovery calls for intrinsic passions scarcely forthcoming in exchange for pecuniary gains. For example, a stupendously enormous bounty and perks cannot guarantee a scientist’s success in inventing a fundamental scientific principle such as the law of relativity or law of gravitation. Nobody would perhaps dare to say that the prospect of a huge personal bounty attached with the Nobel Prize has been even remotely instrumental to the stupendous academic (scientific) contributions of the laureates. As is exemplified in the history of civilisation, pecuniary gains like personal wealth and affluence, while “condemned” from being the mainspring of inventive and creative passions, are very often found, not surprisingly, to trail the latter. But passion for transcending the already known or achieved can only be, like fire, kindled through enlightening, inspiring, and liberal education; it cannot be manufactured like any other economic commodity. As Bertrand Russell cautions the world, “...men in whom this passion exists must *not* be fettered by the shackles of a *utilitarian* philosophy, for to their ardour we owe all that makes man great” (Russell 1926: 197; emphasis added).

The preponderance of secular, humanistic and liberal ideals of education over the post-Renaissance eras did not come about abruptly, but through indomitable agencies of enlightened/objective thinking, reasoning, debating, educating, and legislating along with deepening democracy and human liberty.³ In this process of civilisational progression, the role of education has been pivotal, albeit invaluable, and hence largely immeasurable in strict empirical terms, since its extensive reach and depth is hardly amenable to mundane pecuniary calculations and such other mainstays of mainstream economics. Who can dare to doubt the key role of liberal, rational and humanistic thinking, arguments, and their articulation through education in humanity’s decisive trampling of the entrenched inhumanity and slavery of the medieval ages?

Education thus is unquestionably a major pillar of human civilisation, which according to Albert Schweitzer is “the sum

total of all progress made by ‘mankind’ in every sphere of action and from every point of view, insofar as this progress is serviceable for the spiritual perfecting of the individual.” Indeed the civilisational progress, only a part of which is constituted of material and technological improvements, flows out of passionate nurture and cultivation of creative urge and enlightened proclivities through education untinkered by narrow pecuniary considerations. Consequently, civilisational progression is something which could remain alive and relevant even if an imminent “end of history” of the post-cold war world in the Francis Fukuyama sense would have come largely true. Nor does it entail an asymptotic ending like the one envisaged in W W Rostow’s circumspect notion of the “age of mass consumption” being the final stage of economic development.

Since the era of Renaissance, the role or purpose of education has continued for long to be viewed as lying not just in its immediate instrumentality or utility to the tangible material achievements, but much beyond or perhaps indeed as the “life-blood” of civilisational progression (e.g., through cultivation of fundamental research, objective ideas, critical thinking and passion for making intellectual contribution towards fuller understanding of nature and society).⁴ In constantly keeping up its excellence, there has perennially been a judicious exclusivity of higher education reserved only for those who have the right passion and mind for it. This natural exclusivity of higher learning (similar to exclusivity in gymnastics or classical music) ought not to be foregone, say, just for the sake of “economic growth” imminent due to the boost spurred by emerging “mass market for educational degrees and credentials”. Let a person with her rising incomes and wealth buy a new painting or classic stories for their enlightening ingredients and universal tastes, but not the creator’s eminence, esteem, and creativity. Let us not forget the famous French proverb that one can, by dint of force bring a horse to the bank of a river, but the horse cannot be forced into drinking even its single drop of water!

Capture of Education by Economics: A Cold War Agenda?

Soon after the second world war, the role, functions, efficiency and finance of the educational sector began receiving a major chunk of strategic attention from influential quarters at various levels in the advanced western nations generally and the United States (us) in particular. One plausible reason could be that education is a potent channel for shaping and moulding people’s ideology, world view, and opinions. For example, Dwight D Eisenhower as the president of Columbia University in New York, while denouncing the federal intrusion into public schools, writes in the late 1940s in a typical cold war rhetoric that “unless we are careful, even the great and necessary educational processes in our country will become yet another vehicle by which the believers in paternalism, if not outright socialism, will gain still additional power for the central government”.⁵ Notably there has been relatively little serious research into ascertaining the net impact of the cold war per se on academies, universities and overall intellectual tone, texture, and directions, except for a few anecdotal studies/accounts (e.g., Chomsky et al 1997).

Well up to the second world war America's education, much like the rest of the western world, has been guided by liberal ideals that include democratic and political equality, primacy of cultivation of intellect and intellectual skills distinct from practical knowledge and applied skills (Mulcahy 2010). However, the 1950s witnessed the beginning of an intellectual groundwork for a radical (not exactly progressive) change in ideational, attitudinal, and ideological arenas pertaining to education. To start with, there were suddenly "conscious efforts to organise, institutionalise and promote the comparative study of education in the United States", with the formation of the Comparative Education Society in 1956 followed next year by the inauguration of its service organ, namely, the *Comparative Education Review*. In this formative period "considerable emphasis was placed on the teaching of comparative education in American colleges and universities and its use in the preparation of teachers" (Kazamias and Schwartz 1977: 154), but the Society's many other activities such as study tours, conferences, seminars, and preparation of textbooks sooner or later pervaded much of the globe.

The new comparative education paradigm invoked a rather practical view of treating education as an instrument for achieving social, economic, and political objectives. It also emphasised the theoretical imperative (unlike in the tradition) of applying to educational discourse the concepts and quantifying techniques of social sciences, especially those of sociology, political science, and economics. Although the subject-matter of comparison in the field of comparative education was originally of "ideas, ideals and forms" of education, it eventually got centred around two domains, namely, school-centred problems and school-society relationships (Kazamias and Schwartz 1977: 153-54). There are three distinct dimensions of the new lines of thinking and underlying premises of the comparative education approach:

- (a) structural-functionalism: social functions, social interdependence, social order or consensus and value-free science;
- (b) development education: stressing human capital formation, manpower planning, political socialisation and nation-building, attitudinal modernity and institutional differentiation and specialisation;
- (c) methodological empiricism: emphasis on numerical methods to achieve precise and reliable knowledge and objective explanations independent of the phenomena observed.

Neo-liberal ideological predilections/overtone of the new comparative education paradigm evoked some criticisms. For example, the emphasis on a crude functionalism founded on instrumental values of education in maintaining stability or in raising "social efficiency" gives it not only a static and politically conservative temper, but "by refusing to deal frontally with categorical purposes and human projects, functionalism depoliticizes its subject-matter and trivializes its concerns" (Barber 1972; quoted in Kazamias and Schwartz 1977: 162). Besides, the structural-functional perspective is characterised by its reductionist tendencies, its restrictions on raising questions, conservative ideology regarding schools, and its disregard for important aspects of educational change (Kazamias 1963, 1972). Indeed, structural-functionalism, as

a framework to analyse and interpret society and social changes, has often been assessed as "consensus-oriented, politically conservative, and ahistorical", with its tacit acceptance of "the inevitability of some social and economic inequalities" (Kazamias and Schwartz 1977: 162). But such critiques generally proved to be of negligible consequence relative to the immensity of newly-launched global endeavour forging neo-liberal (economic) perspective on educational thinking and practice.

Human Capital and Financial Investments

Almost simultaneously, a section of the mainstream economics profession began highlighting and publicising the role of education predominantly as a means to the creation of a "new" economic resource, namely, "human capital", a term first coined around the early 1960s. Addition of education, skill and training of the population – so-called human capital formation – is found no less critical than physical capital accumulation in explaining economic growth, as it were, across the industrial world over about half a century up to the post-world war years. This (allegedly) new revelation of the 1960s that "investment expenditure" on education represents essentially human capital accumulation took on immediately "the character of a discovery" (Myrdal 1968: 1544). As its immediate upshot – thanks to substantial benefaction from major multinational agencies and big corporate foundations – nearly the whole world began treating "education" as an "investment in man" crucial for economic growth.

The clue to the immediate popularity of this idea does not lie exactly in its newness, as it was already an "article of faith" by the early part of the 20th century (Cohen and Neufeld 1981: 71). However, there emerged a new pervasive awakening that "widely differing observed phenomenon could be rendered intelligible by the idea of human capital formation" (Blaug 1968: 11). To quote Machlup (1970: 1), "(t)he literature on the subject of education and economic growth is some two hundred years old, but only in the last ten years has the flow of publications taken on the aspects of a flood" – a historic fact which still remains largely unravelled.

Education was virtually never put into a conceptual strait-jacket of financial investment prior to the currency of the "human capital" in the 1960s when there was "a mounting campaign for the laissez-faire finance of education" (e.g., "the imposition of direct charges and the establishment of private institutions") (Preece 1971: 154, 162). A pioneering and influential voice for a laissez-faire policy in education was put forth in 1962 by Milton Friedman, who proposed not only that "individuals should bear the costs of investments in themselves", but also that the existing state schools should be denationalised, with a view to reaping potential benefits (e.g., optimum allocation of resources, competition between educational institutions, and parents' freedom of choice for school/college) purportedly contingent upon free-play of market mechanism. In the parlance of mainstream economics, education since the early 1960s thus began to be increasingly seen as a private good, calling for private investment expenditures by parents and thereby weakening its centuries-old notion as a public

good or a publicly-funded “service” in a larger societal perspective (Desai 2002 and literature cited therein).

One offshoot of education viewed chiefly as a means to human capital formation has been the build-up of a case, in line with neo-liberal economic thinking, for subjecting education increasingly to market forces and business competition – thanks to the vigorous initiatives both on the part of international funding agencies and a section of the economics profession. For example, many privately managed research organisations, under the generic name of “think tank”, sprang up with implicit or explicit agenda of instilling advocating neo-liberal ideas and policy. As for illustration, the Institute of Economic Affairs, an “original free-market think tank”, founded in London in 1955, had started commissioning studies that were to question the age-old views about the purpose, nature, and finance of education. In particular the overwhelming share of state expenditure and responsibility in the provision of education as a public good was ruthlessly attacked with a view to bringing educational provision increasingly within the ambit of free market forces (West 1965).

Indeed it could hardly be a sheer historical coincidence that 1961 witnessed both the publication of the celebrated paper of Theodore W Schultz on “Investment in Human Capital” (presented just a few months earlier at the 73rd Annual Conference of the American Economic Association), the new-born Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) (first) Policy Conference on Economic Growth and Investment in Education (in Washington DC), which aimed at bringing to “the centre-stage in the international dialogue” “emerging theories of human capital then being developed by Gary Becker, Theodore Schultz and others” (OECD 2011: 13), as well as the commissioning of a committee on British higher education under the chairmanship of Lionel Robbins. This committee’s report, submitted in 1963 and favouring rapid expansion of higher education was accepted within 24 hours by the British parliament. In 1962 the *International Social Science Journal*, an organ of UNESCO, devoted an entire issue to the “Economics of Education” containing about seven articles laying stress almost exclusively on the economic prospects and predicaments of education. Notably, the Robbins’ report too was overwhelmingly (if not exclusively) oriented to the economic issues and concerns pertaining to higher education: “The more people in higher education, the better the economy” (quoted in Gibney 2013: 6).

There has been a galloping sway of the human capital paradigm since the early 1960s under the newly-found rubric of capitalist growth, namely, that “(t)he accumulation of knowledge and its transmission to new generations represents an increasingly important part of economic activity” (Vaizey 1962: 619), with its concomitant call for freeing education from age-old protection and responsibility of the state. Educational research began to be conducted increasingly within the disciplinary domain of economics, since education now came to be viewed as “an industry like any other” of which production technology needed to be understood (only through economic analysis) with a view to enhancing its

“productivity” (Vaizey 1962). This marked a virtual call for a conscious break from the pre-existing foremost ideas and arguments pertaining to the philosophy and practices of education even in its immediate past.

Free Enterprise Education

An early survey of literature on the economics of education notes that “while economists have long been aware of the importance of education, it is only recently that attempts at quantifying the value of this education have been made” (Woodfill 1963: 4). In the 1960s and 1970s there were attempts – often propagandist/partisan in spirit/tone – at challenging the classical arguments favourable, on the whole, to the comprehensive provisioning of education as a public good or service. These critiques of classical political economy’s favour to the state-run education often culminated into blatant advocacy of free private enterprise, albeit with conveniently selective state support and regulation (West 1965). For instance, the entire classical case for a major chunk of state finance and control over education was reduced by neo-liberal thinking to rest only on two grounds, namely, “protection of children” from parental ignorance or misperceptions and “neighbourhood” effects of education in curbing crime and delinquency in society (West 1965). While purposive use of selective pro-market excerpts/evidence was harnessed to discredit classical thoughts for public funding of education in the 20th century context, the classical concerns for societal hazards and risks of leaving education at the hands of private business/enterprises (driven by profit motive) got overall overlooked. A subtle antagonism between the arguments of Adam Smith and J S Mill on the question of suitability of private business competition in educational provision was sometimes sought to be posited with a view to undermining the long-standing case for state control of education (West 1964). Indeed E G West concludes his arguably self-styled dissection of selective classical arguments favourable to the state’s sway over education by stating that “there is no special virtue in the passive acceptance of a dominant government role in education merely on the ground that “history” supports it” (West 1965: 233).

Alongside rapid articulation of human capital perspective, there has evidently been a build-up of a case and public consensus for enhancement of private sector’s stake in education and/or restructuring of public educational institutions in the lines with the logic of the competitive market. In fact there has been a luxuriant growth of economic analyses of what was hyped as the most pressing proximate malice pertaining to financial and other economic issues of educational provision. First, the “rising cost of education per student” (i e, increasing proportion of total public expenditure on education) in most of the western/industrialised countries raised a voice of alarm, calling for its detailed economic diagnosis and appropriate economic remedy (Bowen 2012 and literature cited therein). The explanation, sought mostly within a production function framework in the tradition of neoclassical economics, was often shown to lie crucially in the labour-intensive nature of higher educational activity and output, with relatively little

absorption, unlike in most other productive processes, of productivity-enhancing capital-intensive technological changes. To put the point in terms of a simple but astute analogy:

while productivity gains have made it possible to assemble cars with only a fraction of the labour that was once required, it still takes four musicians nine minutes to perform Beethoven's String Quartet in C minor, just as it did in the 19th century (quoted in Bowen 2012: 4).

The policy recommendations turned out – unsurprisingly – to be in tune with what was pushed globally (at the behest of major multilateral agencies such as the World Trade Organisation, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) under the generic names of economic reforms and structural adjustment programmes: First, cost-reducing methods, reforms, and technological change be increasingly introduced in educational institutions across the world; and second, for the sake of augmenting “efficiency” and “productivity” in educational enterprises, there be growing incentives and encouragements towards privatisation and free market competition in the provision or sale of what has increasingly come to be portrayed as private educational “care” of the citizens or “clients”. The latter is particularly relevant to the increasingly pervasive notion that “education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions” (Labaree 1997: 42).⁶ In its sequel the entire education question and related research and policy formulation appear to have got eclipsed by the neo-liberal economic thinking and perceptions. Even the task of deciding about the judiciousness/priority of the preservation of heritage buildings in a country or a location is often being left to the committees presided over not by historians but by economists very often of neoliberal persuasions.

It is, of course, remarkable that these newly mounted economic arguments in the neo-liberal lines could walk rather easily over the discipline of education, with comparatively little effective resistance and opposition from the latter.⁷ Even though there have been a few serious questionings within the disciplinary boundary of education (Preece 1971; Grace 1989; Giroux 1988, 1998), such stray dissenting voices have been hardly heeded in parliamentary discourse, discussions, and legislative sessions across the world. In order to illuminate these paradigm shifts and related ideological groundwork for educational reforms on the lines of neo-liberal economic thinking, we will now have a brief look at what was going on since the 1950s in school education in the us, a major seat of neo-liberal economic thoughts and practices.

Concerns and Confusion over Student ‘Achievements’

Admittedly, the first ripples of what was to become the major shift in post-world war America's educational paradigm and policy appeared in the sphere of curriculum-building. In 1949 a relatively thin book titled *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* by Ralph Tyler, published by the Chicago University Press, proposed a dramatic shake-up of the pre-existing methods, ideas, practices of curriculum formation, of which the starting point was the identification of some objectives in close

relation to “complex” and “continually changing” contemporary (as opposed to lower-level technological past) life. The ideal school curriculum, as suggested by Tyler's book, ought to be designed by keeping predominantly in view not those students who intend to pursue higher levels of learning and education, but those who would possibly leave school education to join some gainful activity or employment in the economy. Thus the essence of the newly proposed principles of curriculum-framing lies in the identification of some behavioural, technically rational, and largely measurable/quantifiable objectives or educational functions to be achieved at each educational level. For example, the science curriculum would be best designed, according to Tyler's recommendations, if it serves three educational functions: improvement of individual and public health; use and conservation of natural resources; and a “satisfying” familiarity with the world-picture. The kindling of students' curiosity and imagination and thereby a thirst for new knowledge/scientific theory – a cornerstone of an ideal science curriculum in schools over a long preceding period – effectively became a casualty under the newly publicised paradigms of curriculum and instruction founded overwhelmingly on quantifiable or measurable objectives and outcomes. The paradigm of curriculum-building in the lines of Tyler's book of 1949 received so much of immediate praise and patronage that it sooner or later came to assume almost hegemonic supremacy throughout the schools in the us and even much beyond.

Somewhat parallel both with the rise of measurable objectives-based and functions-oriented curriculum and planning in the 1950s and with the launch of the economic (human capital) perspective on education in the early 1960s has been the emergence of a much-hyped consternation in American influential circles over a comparatively low (or perhaps falling) standard of education. For example, the Soviet Union's successful launch of the Sputnik in the mid-1950s sparked a near panic within the us federal administration. This culminated into substantial flow of federal aid to schools with a view to augmenting the American students' skills, aptitude, and intelligence in scientific understanding and mathematical proficiency. Apart from the introduction of the National Defence Education Act of 1958, the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965 (ESEA) spearheaded an upsurge in the flow of us federal aid towards school education across states purportedly to address both quality and equality in educational access and outcomes. But the actual achievements after the decisive federal aid towards making schools infrastructurally and qualitatively equipped and up-to-date became increasingly murky.

Following the key finding of the report of a panel of experts from the college board, there emerged a media hype in the late 1970s over a steady decline in the so-called Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score over the preceding 14 years (i.e., since the promulgation of ESEA), airing widespread need for urgently enhancing students' “basic skills competency” (i.e., proficiency in reading and mathematics). This, of course, aptly invited an apprehension that “state-mandated basic skills competency testing could drive schools to “teach to the test” without

necessarily offering a well-rounded, holistic, general, or “authentic” education to their students” (New York State Education Department 2009: 42). In response to “the widespread public perception that something was seriously remiss” in the us educational system, the Secretary of the Education Department set up in August 1981 a National Commission on Excellence in Education, which submitted in 1983 its report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report essentially rang an alarm bell, namely, that the us was losing its edge in vigorous economic competition with other countries, particularly Japan, calling for a renewed commitment to building schools “of high quality throughout the length and breadth” of the country. As the report says in its candid eloquence, “...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). As was alleged in the report, “public schools had prioritized *access* over achievement (*equity* over excellence) and had, in the process, short changed the very students who most needed high academic standards” (New York State Education Department 2009: 49; italics in original), and it strongly recommended a nationwide system of standardised tests to be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another, and particularly from high school to college.

However, doubts and scepticisms began surfacing over the question of the net impact of the newly launched emphasis on “achievement” and “accountability” being prerequisites for government aid to schools. Indeed, the introduction of compulsory standardised tests, which had particularly hit hard the under achievers amongst the students, led to a dramatic rise in school dropout rates, calling for supplemental aid to help students meet higher academic standards. However the newly appointed secretary of education under President Ronald Reagan’s second term beginning in 1984 concluded, on the basis of countless education evaluation studies, that “increased funding to schools could not guarantee higher test scores”, as “excessive federal regulations had bloated state and local school bureaucracies while diverting limited resources from classrooms” (New York State Education Department 2009: 51). Critics, of course, accused the secretary of education of hiding behind a flood of statistics that bore no link to actual reforms in curriculum and instruction.

Autonomy for the Market

President George H W Bush, early in his tenure starting in 1989, began using close links to the business community and increased the focus on educational outcomes by instituting new “accountability” based on a standardised performance index for all students. This new focus was founded on a report *Time for Results* released in 1986 by the National Governors Association, which proposed a deal between levels of government. Schools, according to its recommendations, would be free from many constraints of government regulation in exchange for demonstrable gains in achievement. Such relaxation in regulations appealed to the business community and

its so-called “animal spirits” already on the lookout for ways to spur “technical innovation” and “efficiency” in the education sector. What followed in reality in the sphere of curriculum reform in the us is well captured in J McKerman’s following words:

the neoconservatives have sold policy-makers the notion that what is to count as ‘official curriculum’ is a political strategy exercised to aid such causes as market ideology, personal choice of schooling, standards for literacy, school crime and violence (McKerman 2008: 5).

Thus an escalating sway of the business/managerial values and orientation in the realms of curriculum reform and evaluation of teacher and school performance can reasonably be thought to have taken its toll in the form of manifest departures from the time-tested ideals in education, namely, equality of educational opportunity, educational/academic autonomy, liberty and liberalism. As an eminent educationist writes,

curriculum is part of selective tradition, someone’s selection, some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people (quoted in Davis 2007: 33).

Since the 1980s the new political right in both the us and uk called for accountability and “back to basics” or an essentialist theory, which entails “a notion of teaching and testing of pupils, alongside appraisal of teachers’ performances and competencies in subject matter”. This often combined with new offshoots such as “cultural patriotism” and “heritage restoration”. It is worth noting here that all this has been sought to be achieved largely by taking “autonomy” away from teachers and professors and giving it to the special interest groups and government (quoted in Davis 2007: 5). In its sequel, the new curricula and revised textbooks incorporated a greater dose than ever before of market-orientation and pecuniary cost-benefit consciousness; new capital-intensive/labour-reducing gadgets briskly marketed by private industrial houses multiplied; the gates of educational institutions became increasingly open to the (economic) efficiency-raising (in terms of cost-minimisation and profit-maximisation) private entrepreneurs; and the schools and higher educational institutions all over the globe began to be increasingly reoriented (or reformed?) and subservient to the impeccable dominance of hardcore market economy principles and concepts such as productivity, cost, revenues, returns, prices, and investment as well as international competitiveness and “ranks” in the increasingly globalised “market” for education.

These changes in the educational ideology and policy became sooner or later pretty pervasive across much of the world through the influential agency of multilateral organisations, non-governmental organisations and numerous satellite think tanks, and other mechanisms of which detailed illumination and illustration, though useful, is beyond the scope of the present paper. Let us now turn to the upshot of all this reform and transformation of educational paradigm, ideology, curriculum, related practices and policies particularly after the second world war, with a view to identifying the major directions of change in diverse indicators of intellectual, ideational, or civilisational levels of the younger

generations who have received, or have been receiving, education thoroughly reformed, reoriented, and restructured globally on the lines of neo-liberal economic perspectives and thinking elucidated above.

Declining Standards of Education and Learning

Over several preceding decades there has been doubtlessly enormous global record of rapid increases in educational opportunities, investment/expenditure, student enrolment and, of course, in the number or proportion of population with educational degrees or certificates, no matter whether acquired as a private good or as a public good, whether at elementary, secondary or higher levels. All this seems broadly in line with the dominant neo-liberal (economic) thinking which takes education both as a prime agent for “human capital” formation required for sustained economic growth and also as a big boost to the economy, investment, entrepreneurship in response to growing “consumer demand” for educational qualifications, credentials, or degrees spurred jointly by demographic trends, rising personal incomes and changing notion and purpose of education itself. However, the mounting euphoria since the 1960s – both in terms of neo-liberal economic theorisation and actual initiatives/programmes/policy – over education/human capital accumulation as a key to self-sustaining economic growth received a jolt around the early 2000s. For example, a few major studies (Pritchett 2001; Easterly 2001; Wolff 2000; Wolf 2002) brought out convincing cross-national evidence of a glaring mismatch, namely, between the rapid educational expansion or human capital formation and its relatively little growth impact/performance (e.g., on the growth of output per worker).

While expansion of basic education in developing countries has doubtlessly proved to be instrumental to the improvement of some aspects of human development (e.g., improvement in infant, child and maternal health/mortality, gender relations) particularly among poorer sections of population, the net impact of overall educational expansion on the productivity or income per worker at the aggregate level has been rather “disappointing” across countries, with some cases even showing negative association between them, depending on historical, sociopolitical, institutional specificities. In any case our present concern is more directly with the implications of the increasingly expansive and widely inclusive college/university education and its rapidly growing global market for overall intellectual level, texture, and standard of the people and society at large.

It is of interest that among the major plausible explanations for the globally evident failure of educational (human capital) expansion in translating itself into productivity increase/economic growth, both the diversion of the bulk of newly acquired skills towards privately remunerative but socially wasteful (and sometimes even socially counterproductive) activities and the deterioration of quality/content of education in imparting cognitive skills loom large in sizeable number of countries (Pritchett 2001). This appears consistent *inter alia* with the rush for “educational credentials” (somewhat distinct

from “human capital”) pervasively perceived as crucial for the fulfilment of educational goal of upward social mobility, which calls for emphasis on “individual status attainment rather than the production of human capital” (Labaree 1997: 51).

Consistent with the finding of negligible growth effects of tertiary educational expansion at the cross-country level, there has been a growing body of country-level evidence, apprehension, and perceived alarm about a declining trend in standard or quality of general academic skills, aptitudes, and knowledge acquired through college education (e.g., Labaree 1997, especially footnote 20 and references cited therein). Initially the conclusion of a falling quality or standard of acquired educational skills, especially at the undergraduate level, was based mainly on the perceptions of certain groups of stakeholders, not on students’ actual performance. But George Kuh in a paper published in 1999 provides relevant evidence from an important study based on temporal comparison of features and quality of school experience, efforts, and performance as revealed by different cohorts of students between the 1960s and 1990s (Kuh 1999).

As is shown by this study, extensive fractions of students (more than half to as many as four-fifths) are found to have made substantial progress in many areas considered vital to living a self-sufficient, civically responsible, and economically productive life after college, namely, intellectual and communication skills (synthesis, analysis, writing, self-directed learning), personal and social development skills (understanding self and others, being able to function as a team member), and vocational training. But strikingly the proportion of students, who have reported substantial progress in many areas traditionally considered the domain of general education (e.g., appreciation and understanding of literature, the arts, science, values development), has declined. In fact, compared to their counterparts of a decade ago, the students in the 1990s have appeared to be devoting less effort to the activities related to learning and personal development.

Perhaps most disturbingly, despite distinct record of lower levels of effort put by students in the 1990s, they on the whole have happened to fetch higher grades than previously; this is reflected in steady increases in the fraction of college students reporting B+ or higher grades over time since the 1960s. These trends have been fairly comprehensive and pervasive across all institutional types, though in some instances the magnitudes differ slightly. Although there are some potential pitfalls of the findings which are not based on strictly longitudinal data set of the same colleges at different points in time, the major findings of the study are found substantially consistent with the findings of other and more robust studies.

In fact a considerable amount of evidence and related literature has since emerged to pinpoint similar trends and concerns. For example, in a recent powerful exposition David Kirp (2004) has shown how in course of the flourishing dominance of market ideology and neo-liberal reforms in education an English department is turned into a revenue centre; how teachers grade students as “customers” they must please; how industries dictate a university’s research agenda; how the

business values, namely, efficiency, immediate practical usefulness, and marketplace triumph emerge as the best measures of a university's success; how taxpayer-supported academic research is turned into profitable patents; and how the liberal arts shrink under the pressure to be self-supporting.

Spellings Commission

Almost simultaneously a collection of essays *Declining By Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* published in 2005 examines various aspects of actual learning in institutions of higher education across the us and reveals obtrusive signs of declines in the standard and quality of educational content and skills imparted over time. Interestingly, however, the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, commissioned in 2005 a committee composed largely of business representatives to recommend changes in the national policy pertaining to higher education. The Spellings Commission brought out in 2006 its report *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of us Higher Education*, which documented and suggested policy changes to address what they saw as some disturbing trends including the rising cost of higher education. However the Spellings Commission's report offers no programme to address the rising cost of education and ignores the fact that over the preceding 15 years the American states have systematically reduced the proportion of funding for public colleges and universities (Selfe 2007), leaving even land grant institutions increasingly dependent – in the lines of private schools – on private funding sources such as tuition, alumni contributions, and corporate research.

In a similar vein, the Spellings Commission report treats – even more explicitly than ever before – both students and faculty as commodities and thereby undervalues them and their work. Students, for example, are seen as units of wealth that the university produces for the economy, without mentioning their value as citizens or family members, let alone as the agents for human development and civilisational progress, while faculty at large are represented as being “complacent” and uncaring. However, accumulation of evidence continues to indicate that the standard of educational learning and skills has been falling comprehensively across the world throughout the period of ascendancy of new economic paradigms of education.

In 2007 Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, on the basis of pooling of a wide range of data sets from multiple sources over a span of 30 years starting from the 1960s, brought out a highly interesting revelation pertaining to the temporal trends in the time use patterns of college students across the us (Babcock and Marks 2007).⁸ As is revealed by the study, full-time college students in 1961 had reported an average of 40 hours per week devoted to class and studying across America, whereas their counterpart cohort in 2003 appear to have invested only about 23-26 hours per week, irrespective of race, gender, ability, family background, courses, employment status, college type. This fairly robust finding of secular declines in students' time allocation to academic activity since the 1960s – or what is branded as “falling time cost of college” in economics parlance – certainly deserves serious academic attention and detailed systematic research into its causes and true explanation. For

example, a possible hypothesis could be the typical economic one of technological improvements leading to persistent fall in the time requirements of learning/educational process (namely, that the use of word processors makes term paper preparation less time-intensive now than before).

However such technology-mediated economy on the learners' academic time and effort should have been, one may imagine, offset by the added work pressure in handling much greater bulk of available and accessible information, knowledge, and literature in respective fields now than previously. Conversely, the academic time saved due to improved technology could be well thought to be characteristically ploughed back into other academic efforts, which are relatively immune to technology improvements (e.g., reading, thinking and discussing), but have great potential for improving worth and quality of the academic output.

In this context a more plausible hypothesis, akin to what is suggested by Kirp (2004), could be that the increasing competition among colleges for students who as “consumers of education” are keen to acquire job-fetching degrees or certificates at a comparatively low price paid in terms of effort, pangs, and pains. This in turn could well induce – through more “student-friendly” curriculum – an increased provision of time for students' leisure and entertainment. If this is true, this must take a toll on the quantum of the students' actually learnt skills and acquired academic aptitudes, without commensurately adverse reflection on the grades or marks fetched (or perhaps partly bought). Indeed such apparent paradox of better results going hand-in-hand with declining standards has often been reported in the context of current education scenario both in advanced and developing countries (Green et al 2005).

A few other forces at work towards the inflation of students' grades and marks have been pointed out in recent literature. As the faculty promotion has in many places been made contingent crucially on the reports of periodic teacher evaluations by students, who as rational consumers of education feel they are best served by the teachers most lenient on giving them good grades and marks, there is an in-built tendency among the faculty to keep students in good humour by giving marks well above what are actually deserved.⁹ Such a decaying academic standard acquires added significance in an educational regime (such as India's) characterised by what is aptly described as a “marks race”, wherein parents, teachers and students alike are much too concerned (often nearly obsessed) about how students can score high marks/grades in tests, no matter if in the process the rote learning pervades the educational system and students end up acquiring less of cognitive, creative, intellectual skills and analytical aptitudes (Majumdar and Mooij 2012). This brings in an increasing failure of marks/grades scored to truly reflect the skills and aptitudes acquired. The latter scenario gets testified by employers' frequent grumbling that the degrees or grades or marks obtained by present generations of employees generally appear far short of their expectation in terms of the former's acquired skills, i.e., “employability”. Furthermore, the higher the number of grades and marks in an educational institution, the better is its

rank, other things held the same. This provides incentive and reason for the college management to put pressure on its faculty to ensure that students generally get decent marks and grades – a fact which, when it combines with liberal policy of admission to academic programmes of the college for the sake of greater revenues, cannot but end up lowering the real standard of degrees and grades.¹⁰

In a more recent major study on the standard and quantum of (undergraduate) learning of basic academic skills, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2010) have utilised transcript data, survey responses, and results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (a standardised test taken by students in their first semester and at the end of their second year) in the US in order to calculate the proportion of undergraduate students registering real improvement (or its absence) over their initial levels of basic academic skills and aptitudes. This study reaffirms – perhaps more tellingly than the earlier ones – the worrisome message of falling educational skills and standard imparted to the recent cohorts of students: as many as 36% of undergraduates in the sample did not show any statistically significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication over four years of the post-secondary academic programme (Arum and Roksa 2011). Interestingly, however, the authors refrained from discerning in this large and growing “academically adrift” population any sign or source of a “crisis”, “because institutional and system-level organisational survival is not being threatened in any significant way” (Arum and Roksa 2011).

Conclusions

Thus, as indicated by quite a few recent studies, the current functioning of the educational system in a majority of countries apparently resembles a so-called win-win equilibrium state among all the four parties involved. The first of these parties are students – especially the more fortunate ones with the required financial solvency for paying for college education – who get “good” marks or grades at less effort and perseverance devoted to learning, with a concomitantly smaller quantum

and depth of basic academic skills and aptitudes acquired together with a greater share of leisure and luxury than in the past. The second party involved are the teachers or faculty, eager to find more time to their own professional and career developments, who appear pleasant both to the students and management by (unduly) inflating students’ marks and grades in the evaluations. The third of the parties are the administrators and management, preoccupied with the making of a decent ranking in the international market for education, who are happy to get a long queue of prospective students (clients?) at the time of fresh admission every year. Finally the last party are the government funding agencies who are chiefly interested in new scientific knowledge.

But the question remains to haunt us all: at whose cost is so much of economic gain accrued to these four concerned groups or stake-holders? As goes the basic argument of our present paper, the cost is not immediately economic and technological. It rather takes the form of a toll on the pace and pattern of the civilisational progression: the younger the cohort of citizens, the more obtuse, insensitive, unimaginative, intellectually insolvent they are, pointing to the imperative need for serious rethinking and overhauling of the currently and globally dominant ideas, ideals, and practice in education so as to avert the hastening of a civilisational crisis ahead or perhaps underway already. It is not that sounding an alarm as above is impeccably original or new; authors and scholars have been harping on the onset of comprehensive deterioration of educational content, philosophy, and outcomes for quite sometime now particularly in terms of intellectual, ideational and humanistic standards and levels (Callahan 1962; Gatto 1992; Bloom 1987; Nussbaum 2008; Wolf 2002). However the present paper, by focusing on similar concerns that arise particularly from far-reaching influences/implications of the neo-liberal economic paradigm of education, drives home the message that contemporary humanity cannot treat such envisaged educational (and perhaps civilisational) dilapidation just as another benign banality emanating from the minds which are usual residents of the infamous “ivory tower”.

NOTES

- 1 We consciously avoid using such popular categories and terms as “postmodernism” for the sake of maintaining brevity, consistency, and steadfastness of our argument, exposition and contention.
- 2 A key role that was played historically by state in supporting and maintaining standard, quality, and rigour in academies and higher educational institutions got reaffirmed in the late 19th century when Britain – though one of the pioneers in the Industrial Revolution – experienced relative declines in industrial economy and its international competitiveness vis-à-vis other and newer industrial economies marked by far more extensive state involvement in the higher education than in England (Hobsbawm 1999).
- 3 Indeed, even today the oldest and renowned universities of the world such as Harvard still announce, while seeking to attract the prospective young minds/students, their zeal for liberal education – “an education conducted in a spirit of free inquiry undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility. This kind of learning is not only one of the

enrichments of existence; it is one of the achievements of *civilization*” (italics added; see www.admissions.college.harvard.edu).

- 4 We are, of course, ignoring the arguably nebulous visions often heard, such as the one of launching a “new civilization” virtually cut-off from what and how has our existing civilisation been in place or how we have become what we are. For instance, there are already calls from some quarters for preparations for entering a new form of civilisation: “we may be on the threshold of the emergence of a new form of civilisation, as billions of world citizens interact together, unconstrained by today’s monopolies on knowledge or learning opportunities” (Duderstand 2012: 594).
- 5 Taken from New York State Education Department (2009: 7).
- 6 Labaree (1997) has called this “social mobility” goal of education, which does not mesh well with the two other major goals of education, namely “democratic equality” and “social efficiency”.
- 7 There have been, of course, some economists such as Amartya Sen and James Heckman, who

have persistently held a much broader view about the role and purpose of education, albeit without questioning vigorously the lately dominating narrow economic perspective on education and its deeper civilisational ramifications.

- 8 A slightly revised version of this paper was subsequently brought out as a NBER Working Paper (Babcock and Marks 2010) and then published as an article in *Review of Economics and Statistics* (Babcock and Marks 2011).
- 9 For instance, marks are often not deducted for poor and wrong grammar and spelling (Green at al 2005: 11).
- 10 Several studies that exist, or are being undertaken of late point to the similar educational trends in other developed and developing countries too (Pritchett 2013).

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