

Silent Casualties

Languages in the Wake of Skill Subjects

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Skill training has been fervently promoted as one of the primary means to prepare for work at increasingly earlier stages of the compulsory formal education system. In a state such as Karnataka, where diverse linguistic cultures exist in schools, skill-based subjects have encroached upon the space of language subjects and teaching.

Over the last two decades, there has been a huge push, from the state as well as the industry, for skilling the youth (Confederation of Indian Industry 2014; Ministry of Education 2022; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015; *Hindu BusinessLine* 2017). The skilling discourse has also entered schools, operating on the logic that the sooner the youth are exposed to skills, the more effective it is. Skilling was introduced in schools through a central scheme called the Vocationalisation of Secondary Education (VSE). An arm of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) called the Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE) designed the curriculum and carried out the teacher training process. The hallmark of this new skilling curriculum was that it was compliant with the then newly conceived National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF). NSQF is imagined as an overarching nationwide framework which standardises the skills and training required for jobs in various sectors. In fact, colloquially, within Karnataka schools, the subject is called the “NSQF subject” and the teachers are called “NSQF teachers.”

The push for skills is ongoing (*Business Standard* 2023; *Hindu* 2023) and within schools, the preparation for employment is increasingly envisioned in terms of skilling and specifically through NSQF. This is evident in the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020: 44) and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCERT 2023: 431). This is why NSQF, its implementation, and implications for schools must be paid attention to.

Karnataka's Schooling System and Entry of Skills Subjects

The NSQF subject was envisioned as a four-year programme spanning Classes 9 through 12. In Karnataka, up to Class 10

is governed by the Department of Public Instruction, whereas Classes 11 and 12 are governed by the Department of Pre-university Education. NSQF, being part of the union government's Vocationalisation of Secondary Education scheme, is funded and operated by the union government's Samagra Shikshana Karnataka (SSK) programme. Thus, to implement the NSQF subject across Classes 9 through 12, SSK coordinates with both the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Pre-university Education. Introduced in Karnataka government schools in 2014, the NSQF subject has since steadily expanded. Interactions with the Samagra Shikshana Karnataka staff revealed that it was first introduced as an optional elective subject in 100 schools. Then in 2015, it became an elective that could be taken instead of a third language. In 2016, the first Class 10 board examination in NSQF was conducted. In the subsequent year, it was also started in pre-university colleges. As of academic year 2022–23, 240 schools in Karnataka have the NSQF programme and many schools feature the entire four-year programme.¹ It has also replaced all other job-oriented subjects and courses that were taught under VSE in the state.²

School Timetable as Site of Struggle

Schools are expected to fulfil wide-ranging aims. They must foster a love for learning among students, while also preparing them for employment and work. Schools must impart knowledge while also developing practical skills. They must nurture all developmental needs of children and adolescents, including physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs. This is a normative view, of course. In reality, schools function with a limited set of resources, while balancing competing goals. This inevitably means that some activities are eliminated in favour of others. The way schools go about this process and what ultimately ends up on their time tables is, therefore, a good measure of the priorities of the school system and the political and economic forces at play. So, when a new subject like NSQF enters the school timetable with stout political backing, it often does so by replacing

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subjects which are at the bottom of the curricular hierarchy and do not enjoy similar support. In this particular case, the NSQF skill subject is replacing language subjects that are not Kannada and English, such as Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil.

Karnataka's Complex Linguistic Landscape

Karnataka's schooling system reflects the state's diverse linguistic landscape, both in terms of the media of instruction and languages taught. In terms of the media of instruction in secondary schools and pre-university colleges (which is where NSQF is offered), the vast majority operate in Kannada medium. Although growing in number, English comes a distant second. Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, and other mediums of instruction all make up less than 5% each of all schools (NCERT 2007). As per the three-language formula, students are required to take up their home language as their first language, along with two other languages. So, apart from Kannada, Karnataka's schools also offer Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Tulu, Konkani, and Marathi, among others, as subjects. Second and third languages are typically functional and link languages—such as Kannada, Hindi, and English—intended to enable one to navigate the diverse linguistic landscape of India and access opportunities across the state and country. In the pre-university stage, the requirement of a third language is eliminated. The implementation of this seemingly simple formula is complicated by political and economic influences. First, Karnataka has been stridently championing Kannada as a way to assert its regional identity (Nair 1996). In 2014, the state government famously fought (and lost) a 33-year-long legal battle to make Kannada the compulsory medium of instruction in all primary schools (*Bangalore Mirror* 2014). In 2015, the Karnataka government settled for Kannada as a compulsory first or second language in all schools, including private unaided schools, through the Kannada Language Learning Act, 2015. Second, there is an intense demand for English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools and pre-university colleges. Many parents view English and

access to English-medium education as a pathway to empowerment and opportunities (Kumar 2024). In 2019, the state government, despite its championing of Kannada, gave in to the demand for English-medium education and began English medium sections in government schools (*Deccan Herald* 2023). As of the 2022–23 academic year, there are 2,403 government English medium schools (*Times of India* 2023).

The scenario is straightforward for a student who is a native Kannada speaker. She would most likely go to a Kannada medium school, take up English as her second language, and Hindi as her third language. If she continues to pre-university, she would continue the same two first and second languages.

For students whose home language is not Kannada, the choice of medium of instruction and language subjects can get complicated. For example, in my study, I observed that several students who came from Dakhni-speaking families opted for the English medium. However, their first language tended to be Urdu, second language Kannada (due to the Kannada Language Learning Act), and only the third language was English, even though English was their medium of instruction. This put Dakhni students in the odd situation of studying all of their subjects in their third language. As per the logic of the three-language formula, the scope

of the syllabus progressively decreases from the first to the third language. So, to put it in perspective, for those of us who took up Sanskrit as our third language in school, it would be like studying all the rest of our subjects in Sanskrit.

Thus, even though Karnataka has a wide variety of home languages and the three-language formula in schools is designed to accommodate them, the political backing enjoyed by Kannada and English ensures that these two languages are prioritised over others. Not only does this lead to absurd language combinations for students from non-Kannada-speaking homes, but it also relegates all other languages to the bottom of the hierarchy of the language curriculum. It is within this context that skills-based subjects such as NSQF are entering schools.

Making Way for NSQF, Sidelining Languages

I studied was the NSQF programme in a select set of government schools in Bengaluru. While my research questions dealt with the discourses of work being constructed and circulated within the programme, I could not help but notice how the NSQF subject is quietly replacing language subjects, such as Urdu, Tamil, Hindi, and, in some cases, Kannada.

Through field visits to 11 schools across the Bengaluru Urban area between August 2021 and December 2021,

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consisting of a number of visits made to each school, I conducted 18 classroom observations, 16 semi-structured interviews with NSQF teachers, six group interviews, and three individual interviews with NSQF students. Additional informal interviews and interactions with Department of Education officials were conducted in 2022.

The department's decision to offer the NSQF subject as an elective that can replace a language subject is indicative of the status hierarchy of subjects within schools. It is considered higher than "non-core" subjects like physical education or art. But of the "core" subjects—such as mathematics, social studies, science, and languages—it seems that the languages are the most dispensable. Within languages, there also appears to be a hierarchy with the third language occupying the lowest position in the school curriculum. In high school, NSQF may be taken up instead of a third language. At the pre-university level, where students only take two language subjects, interestingly, NSQF does not replace the second language which typically tends to be English. Instead, it replaces the first language, which is usually Kannada. Revealing the importance of English over Kannada in higher levels of education, an NSQF teacher remarked,³

PU mein to English chahiye hi chahiye. Kaise chod sakte hai? Isiliye first language ko NSQF ke saath merge kar diya. [At the PU stage, English is needed. How can we give it up? That is why the first language has been merged with NSQF.]

Overall, in both high school and pre-university colleges, NSQF and its promise of skilling are being prioritised over the three-language formula and the policy of promoting home languages.

This has a direct impact on the lives of teachers, too. In many of the schools I studied, NSQF teachers are in conflict with language teachers. Language teachers seem to be aware of and responding to their sidelining. They assert the benefits of pursuing higher education and discourage students from taking the skilling route. NSQF teachers, on the other hand, insist that their subject is far more utilitarian and hands-on than a language. Referring to the third language teachers in the school, an NSQF teacher said,⁴

Woh dar te hain ki unka [numerical] strength kam ho jayega aur who transfer ho jayenge [They are afraid that if the number of students in their classes falls, they will get transferred].

To reiterate, as skills subjects continue their march into schools, they encounter the battlefield that is the language curriculum, a reflection of the social, economic, and political stresses of society. There is an enormous demand for English (*Times of India* 2024) and the state government continues to promote Kannada (*Deccan Herald* 2023). Despite the tokenism of the NEP 2020, neither the three-language formula nor the policy of instruction in home languages enjoys similar support. Thus, with relatively less effort, NSQF replaces third languages such as Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil in high school and Kannada in pre-university in Bengaluru's government schools.

The marginalisation of these languages has consequences for people's access to studying their home languages in schools, as well as the linguistic diversity of Karnataka. But most notably, it brings us back to the question of which subjects get established as "core" subjects, enjoying stable positions in the timetable and which subjects are relegated to the category of "non-core" subjects, at risk of getting eliminated as economic, social and political tides shift. Rather than being taken by the tide of skills, we could pause and examine how decisions regarding the introduction of skills subjects are being made. How are we weighing the benefits of skills against the subjects it is replacing? And which knowledge, values, and aims of education are we willing to forgo? Further, are subjects such as languages, whose benefits are less overtly utilitarian, especially at risk?

NOTES

- 1 Personal communication with a Samagra Shiksha Karnataka staff, 6 December 2022.
- 2 Personal communication with a Samagra Shiksha Karnataka staff, 6 December 2022.
- 3 Personal communication, 15 November 2021.
- 4 Personal communication, 15 November 2021.

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