

## Halving the syllabus, squaring knowledge: the flaws in India's school syllabus

There's a scene in the film *Amadeus* where Austrian Emperor Joseph II, looking to stall a promotion for Wolfgang Mozart, commends him on the beautiful music he'd composed for a play. The piece was "brilliant and strikingly original", except that there were "too many notes" and therefore needed to be cut, according to the emperor. "Which ones, your Majesty?" Mozart demanded to know leaving the emperor fumbling. Hopefully Human Resource Development Minister Prakash Javadekar will have planned out portions of the curriculum that need surgical strikes when he implements [his plan of "halving" the school syllabus](#) and know precisely what parts of the history, mathematics, science, Hindi syllabi need to be done away with.

The magic wand?

In a television interview last week, he claimed that the syllabus needed trimming as it had become as weighty as that for an undergraduate arts or commerce degree, and it was leaving children with no time for extra-curricular activities.

In the same interview, Mr. Javadekar said he'd bring back the system of "detention and examinations" in lower classes that the previous United Progressive Alliance government had done away with, under the impression that the sight of lighter school bags and an exam-free childhood would miraculously output happier children (and the votes of their grateful parents).

That an information-overload is stunting our children's all-round development draws rare consensus among political parties. Even the judiciary seems to concur.

Delhi's Education Minister, Manish Sisodia said in 2015 that [schools' syllabus for the 9th to 12th standards would be cut by a quarter](#) and eschew "outdated material" and leave more time for music, theatre and leisure. The Bombay High Court, last June, suggested that [mathematics be made an optional for 10th standard](#) students as lots of students were failing them and those in arts programmes didn't need maths in their programmes.

The common thread in these palliatives is that an enormous work load is the cause of stress among schoolchildren and halving the syllabus would translate into fewer hours of course work and cramming. This fails to acknowledge that the culprit is a system that encourages mindless cramming as the dominant indicator of 'learning'.

Thus, Mr. Javadekar only seems to be the latest in the line of establishment figures signalling that the government will not work towards fixing the blood-sport that examinations are, where the loss or gain of a mark can mean children are forced into careers they have no inclination or aptitude for, and at its worst drive young people to suicide.

There's already research to show that academic anxiety, the attendant stress and the volume of course load are disconnected. Some years ago 100 8th standard students in Chandigarh and Mohali were asked to report their states of mind when studying, playing, watching television, etc for a week. The researchers reported that while schoolwork induced "negative subjective states", those who spent more time in leisure activities noted feeling happier but also registered "higher academic anxiety and lower scholastic achievement." Worries about performance were thus never far from the students' minds, says the 2002 study ('School Stress in India: Effects on time and daily emotions', *International Journal of Behavioral Development*).

Given that the global economy is geared towards knowledge production, children's syllabi are unlikely to ever contract simply because new discoveries and the re-interpretation of old knowledge continuously filter their way from research papers to graduate level dissertations to undergraduate curricula and eventually school textbooks. Two decades ago, it was possible to graduate from elite urban English-medium schools without knowing a programming language and while Darwinian evolution has long been high-school stuff, man-made climate change is already creeping into middle school examinations.

The checklist

So when policy-makers sit to decide on the portions of syllabi that need junking, where would they begin? Logarithms? Because who needs a log-table to multiply big numbers, but then it's the concept of logarithms that helps conveniently illustrate a 10,000-year history of warming trends in the globe. Or maybe they would chop out redundant historical bits of the events leading up to India's freedom movement? The [recent controversy over the theory of evolution](#) shows that even at the highest level of government, there are influential people who haven't quite understood why biological evolution is a necessary part of making sense of the world.

In the meantime, with the entire ecosystem of exam-oriented guide books and coaching classes that require entrance examinations just to get into them, we will continue to churn out a highly educated workforce, which Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak recently described as extremely hard working, ambitious and desirous of the "great life" but lacking in creativity.

In the age of the Web, the ability to memorise facts is a vestigial skill. However, given that knowledge is so much more contested and multi-faceted, it stands to reason that school students need to be trained to apply facts to real-world problems and be evaluated in their abilities to critique, seek out information and produce knowledge of their own. This requires educators to re-imagine testing — everywhere, from kindergarten to management and encourage new Mozarts who're confident of their creativity.

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