

SHOULD WE TEACH ECONOMICS IN SCHOOLS?

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Should We Teach Economics in Schools?¹

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Why Economics is not included in school curriculum? Why Law and Human Rights are not included in school curriculum? Why Environmental Studies, as a separate branch of enquiry, apart from pure sciences like Physics, Chemistry and Biology, is not included in school curriculum? Often these questions come from the subject experts and not from those connected to school education such as parents and teachers. This could be either an effort to find new employment opportunities for their students or out of true concern that the domain knowledge in these disciplines is essential for a school-educated citizen in the modern world.

There is no second opinion as to the relevance of teaching language, literature, mathematics, sciences, history, geography and civics in schools. Doubts are often raised as to the quantum and quality of teaching and learning in these disciplines in schools. There are well founded criticisms that many school boards in India compromise quality for expanding quantity of teaching and learning. As a result, rote memory is preferred to learning to think, apply and create ideas.

With declining standards in teaching and learning of all other essential subjects, claim to include economics as a subject in school curriculum needs a broad-based discussion without extra hours of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, assuming that economics should be taught in schools, an important question that we need to answer is, “should economics be taught as a discipline or as a description of economy without references to theories?” This article tries to find an answer to this question

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after a slightly jaundiced survey of contents of economics courses in schools in UK, the USA, Australia and India.

United Kingdom

Economics has been one of elective subjects for examinations at the 'school leaving level' in United Kingdom since early 1990s. Usually the universities conducted Matriculation examinations and faculty members in economics departments were evaluating the answer scripts. One of the earliest and major reflections on teaching of economics in schools came from Lionnel Robbins in 1955.³ He was quite uncomfortable with teaching of economics as a discipline in schools. After evaluating the answers scripts of school children, he found 'a greater sense of immaturity of touch, of unreality of contents of cases'. He traces a series of causes for this result. First he emphasizes that economics 'is essentially a subject for grown-ups at any rate if it is taught as anything like a theoretical system.'⁴ To learn economics as a theoretical system, one needs to have maturity to understand whole system of complex assumptions and the reality of the world, which they try to reflect. Another important issue is that there is no unified theoretical framework in economics. Every theory is based on a particular ideology, hence value-judgements are inevitable, unlike in pure sciences. As school children are not matured enough to learn these complexities, often the textbooks inculcate bad intellectual habits of side-tracking more relevant and difficult economic propositions and indulge in awkward generalizations. Hence Robbins argues '...(if) the economic instruction confined to a more or less descriptive explanation of everyday events and institutions with a certain amount of relevant history thrown in, I can believe that many of the objections I have

³ Robbins, Lionnel (1955), 'The Teaching of Economics in Schools and Universities', The Economic Journal, Vol.65, No.260 (Dec), pp 579-93.

⁴ Ibid, p.580.

set forth would largely cease to apply'.⁵ Thus it is sufficient to teach economics, not as a discipline of enquiry, but more as a stylized explanation of every-day life, to make it more comprehensible and relevant to school children.

Obviously, Lionel Robbins does not presume knowledge of economics as a pre-requisite for the study of economics at the university level. He even argues, that knowledge of language and a little of algebra and geometry than economics gained in school enhance learning of economics at the university level. He narrates that students who have not opted for Latin and Mathematics in schools enrolled for economics in the universities, whereas his peers preferred students with such specializations. His contention was that basics of economics as a discipline could be taught in universities, whereas it would be enough to enable school students to intelligently read the newspaper.

In 1973, the Report of the Joint Committee of the Royal Economic Society⁶, dwelt into the question of teaching of economics in schools in Britain. Firstly, without discussion, the committee decided that economics should be taught in schools. Secondly, the committee identified three objectives of teaching of economics and examination at A level, namely (i) for students who stop with school education, it should be useful in future walk of life, (ii) for students who take up other courses in the universities and end up working in economic institutions commerce and banking sectors, it should be useful to economic reasoning and enable further study of the subject for professional advancement, and (iii) for students who intend to proceed to its further study as an academic discipline in the universities, it should provide a solid base.

⁵ Ibid, p.502.

⁶ The Royal Economic Society, (1973) The Teaching of Economics in Schools – The Report of a Joint Committee of The Royal Economic Society, The Association of University Teachers of Economics, and The Economics Association, Macmillan, London.

Practically while there are three sets of students with distinct objectives, it is difficult to segregate them as discussion about future course of action is not taken till the completion of the A level examination. Further, the teachers in the committee felt there was no difference in the pedagogy for these different sets of students. Hence the committee decided to give one economics syllabus for the A level examination.

The committee opined that A level course in economics should be taught with the following objectives: (i) a capacity to understand both in theory and in application the principles upon which an economy such as that of the United Kingdom works; (ii) a general understanding of the more important economic institutions within which the national economy operates; and (iii) a capacity to handle, interpret and present the statistical evidence on which economic decisions are reached.

The committee recommended that teaching of mathematics and statistics and their application in economics are essential, but if taught in the economics course, it would make the syllabus too large to be taught and learnt in a single course. Hence, the committee recommended a separate course of 'mathematics and statistics for social sciences'. Hence the syllabus for economics course for A level would include: (i) opportunity cost, marginal principle, comparative advantage and trade, partial equilibrium of demand and supply, factor pricing, and national income; (ii) working of banks, central bank, capital and money markets, labour market, government and public utilities, market economy and imperfections, government to correct imperfections; and (iii) characteristics of economic data, measurement of change, distribution, interpret causal relations and presentation of data and statistics. Since 1973, the basic framework of economics syllabus for A level examination has not substantially changed.

The United States of America

In the USA, economics has been taught in schools since early 1900. The prime objective of teaching economics in school in the USA has been to impart economic literacy, which refers to ability to apply basic economic concepts years later in situations relevant to their lives and different from those encountered in the classroom.

In 1950, the American Economic Association's report on introductory economics courses⁷ recommended that: (a) economics course content should be reduced; (b) economics should be taught as a part of liberal art; (c) it should train students to use analytical tools to deal with current economics standards; (d) it should train students to follow current news to enhance their interest in the applicability of economics, and the quality of class room teaching should improve.

In 1980s, the National Council for Economic Education (NCEE) developed 20 standards that provide bench marks for economic learning from grade IV to grade XII in the US schools. These bench marks reflect the graded understanding market economy in the USA. Every state in the USA has developed the economics syllabi for the grades IV to XII, based on NCEE standards. The syllabi for high school economics, include only those concepts relevant to understand the market economy and the minimum role that the government plays in facilitating such an economy. Thus in both UK and the USA the high school economics courses train the students in understanding the system of their respective economics and gives little exposure to the theoretical frameworks in economics. This approach is similar to what Lionel Robbins suggested in 1955 with regard to teaching of economics in schools.

⁷ As quoted in Hansen, W. Lee, Michael K. Salemi and John. J. Segifried, (2001) Creating a Standard-Based Economics Principles Course, WP no: 01-W05, March 2001, Department of Economics, Vanderbilt University.

Australia

The schools in Australia started teaching economics since the second half of 1900. The rationale for teaching economics in Australian schools emanates from how economics as a discipline tries to enhance exploring and understanding the cobweb of relationships between economic institutions and problem. 'Economics investigates the choices which all people, groups and societies face as they confront the ongoing problem of satisfying their unlimited wants with limited resources. Economics aims to analyze and understand the allocation, utilization and distribution of science resources that determine our wealth and well-being. Economics develops the knowledge, reasoning and interpretation skills that form an important component of understanding personal, business and government behaviour at the local, national and global levels'.

The economics syllabi from level III to level VIII have been developed and are being taught with the following expected learning outcomes: (i) able to collect, arrange and interpret economic data; (ii) able to understand and analyze the functioning of national and international economies and the forces at play; and (iii) able to understand the need for public policy to manage the economy and the impact of such public policies.

Thus, the content of economics courses in Australian school is no different from those being taught in the USA and the UK. The countries with predominantly developed market economies find it essential to train the students in uncritical understanding of market system.

The rationale for teaching economics from class VI in Indian schools emanates from the National Curriculum Framework 2005. (NCF 2005). The NCF 2005 states, "Social Science content needs to focus on conceptual understanding and

should equip children with the ability to think independently and reflect critically on social issues”.⁸

The NCF 2005 further states that the curriculum practices should be based on the values enshrined in the Constitution, such as social justice and secularism in a pluralistic society. As such there is a need to impart critical thinking skills with a multi-paradigm approach to teaching of economics in schools. Understanding the multi-paradigm approach to economic issues require a fairly higher level of maturity to understand abstract theoretical constructs as well as advanced quantitative techniques to analyze economic data. As Lionel Robbins had warned, this would be too difficult to teach to school children even at the higher secondary level.

The economics textbooks for classes VI to X by the National Council for Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, give stylized facts and analysis of Indian economy. Thus the actual content of economic courses in Indian high schools also, like those in the USA, UK and Australia, give an exposition to the national economy. But, unlike in those economies, Indian economy being a mixed one, the role of market is often changing in the different sectors and regions in the economy. There is a dilemma as to the relative importance to be given to market and the state as economic agents, and giving a critical exposition to these economic issues to school children is rather difficult. Hence we find a stylized exposition to Indian economy is rather incomplete in the economics syllabi for classes VI to X.

Even at the higher secondary level, the syllabus is not designed to provide gradual improvement in learning economics as a discipline when the students move from XI standard to XII standard. The syllabus for XI standard is totally disconnected with the syllabus for XII standard. Generally in XI standard, facts and issues in Indian

⁸ Government of India, (2005) National Curriculum Framework, 2005, National Council for Educational Research and Training, New Delhi.

Economy are taught and in XII standard a standard principles of economics course is given with select topics from microeconomics, macroeconomics, monetary theory and public finance. Often both the school authorities and students find it convenient to start the principles course after a cursory look at the Indian Economy text in XI standard itself. But is a good mixture of concepts and economic facts and issues are given can be designed and graded in such a way that there is a logical sequencing of topics as the students move from standard XI to standard XII.

The Answer

The analysis of contents of economics courses in schools in the UK, the USA, Australia and India leaves a sequence of questions for the educationists to seek answers, if any meaningful economics teaching has to take place in schools.

Economic theories evolve out of reactions to contemporary issues, and economic theories have strong ideological bases. Thus, when no single theory has universal acceptance, choosing a particular conceptual framework will not impart critical thinking, which is essential to understand the social issues. In this context, can we teach economic facts and institutions without referring to any conceptual framework? If we have to teach the Indian economy as a set of facts and institutions, we will be giving an uncritical account of Indian economy, without raising important questions, say, about inequality and regional imbalance. Is this not contrary to the NCF 2005 objective of strengthening a system of education in a pluralistic society? The analysis of the economics courses in schools in the four countries points out that it is unwise to teach economics as a discipline to high school children, whereas we need to provide a discipline-based approach, which is, teaching economics as a discipline at the higher secondary level. It will be quite challenging to teach the facts and issues in Indian Economy to high school children as there is a strong interplay of

market forces and state control in India. Drawing lessons from teaching of history as a social studies paper would be quite instructive for designing economics courses for high schools. We have just started experimenting with teaching of economics in high schools; there should be documentation of state-level experiments in designing syllabi, creating textbooks, teaching methods and evaluation.