

# **DEVELOPING SKILL LITERACY...**

*Ideas for Interventions against Unemployment.*

*By Gideon Arulmani,*

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## **DEVELOPING SKILL LITERACY: *Ideas for Interventions against Unemployment.***

Nagesh is a strong, handsome and intelligent 18 year old young man who lives in one of the slums of Bangalore. Nagesh went to one of local Corporation Schools and two years ago, he wrote his high school examination. When the results were announced, Nagesh found that he had *failed*. Nagesh could not afford to stay financially unproductive and so he began working as an "assistant", at a pavement puncture shop. His earning per day, was three rupees. Today, two years later, Nagesh has changed jobs twelve times and currently earns ten rupees a day, working in a car repair shop.

Nagesh's friend Sudhakar, *passed* his high school examination. He too could not afford to stay financially unproductive and began to work as newspaper delivery boy.. Over two years, Sudhakar, went through ten jobs. Today he works as a helper in a factory, earning four hundred rupees a month.

What is the common thread running through the lives of both these young people, and thousands more just like them? Both of them are from the *lower socio economic status* group and both of them entered the world of work, as *unskilled labourers*. Look at the trajectory of these young people's lives. It's a trajectory characterised by frequent job change and minimal improvement in their economic status. A follow up of these young people over say, the next five years, would reveal, that they would continue to find themselves in low skill employment situations with no prospects for advancement... the typical precursor to under employment and chronic unemployment. This is the story of thousands of young people in our country today.

### ***SKILL LITERACY:***

A concept I would like to introduce through this writing is the idea of Skill Literacy. When Nagesh and Sudhkar entered the world of work their mastery over a specific a set of skills related to an occupation was next to nothing. Their skill literacy was low. Countless others like them, enter the world of work, without the necessary skills to compete successfully in the job market. Paradoxically, this is true even amongst those who go on to higher education. A number of graduate courses in India today, enhance students' knowledge of a set of *subjects*. But they fail to provide them with *work skills*. Low levels of skill literacy could contribute directly to the problems of underemployment and unemployment. Unemployment is a spectre that has haunted the Indian economy for the last many decades. The causes of unemployment are complex and have been linked to economic policy, sociological factors, political instability and biocultural change. While a number of theories have been propounded, translations of these theories into successful intervention programmes that enhance skill literacy, has been difficult. One line of enquiry that seems to hold promise is research in the area of Career Psychology. This branch of behavioral research is in its infancy in India. International research, over the last two decades clearly points to the fact that students who go through systematic career guidance, make choices that lead them toward gainful employment.

### ***DIFFERENT NEEDS:***

The theoretical underpinnings of the career development of economically disadvantaged students remain poorly formulated, in India. Investigators pursuing this stream of thought

in other parts of the world, have found that students from lower socioeconomic status groups, present with career development needs that are *different* from other status groups. Key differences seem to exist between socio economic status groups in their *attitudes toward education itself*. Almost 40% of students from lower socioeconomic status groups, *drop out* of schools before they reach high school. Conversely, drop outs among middle and upper socioeconomic status groups are markedly lower. When these families face financial problems, every attempt is made to ensure that the children in the family *continue to study*. A Middle Class family may transfer the child to a cheaper school, but at least, high school education is strenuously sought after. When similar problems strike families from lower income groups, children are often removed from school and sent to work. Families from middle and upper middle socio economic groups, show an *orientation to long term planning* and a definite orientation to prosperity. Lower socioeconomic status groups show a characteristic orientation to the *here and now*. Their planning often does not go beyond the immediate future. This could contribute to the low value they place on education. These groups show a typical inability to delay or forego immediate gain, for the sake of larger, more durable gain in the future. They therefore show a preference to enter the world of work without pausing a little longer to enhance their skill literacy.

### ***DOES WORK SKILLS TRAINING HELP?***

Let me cite an example from our careers work, to illustrate these points. With the intention of enhancing the employment prospects of high school drop outs we initiated a Work Skills Training Programme. A total of seventy nine, sixteen to eighteen year old boys and girls, were placed in factories as helpers. The plan was to provide them with *informal skill learning opportunities*. The programme worked very well...*until the first pay day!* Once our trainees received their first weekly wage, we had a 100% drop out! Analysis of this failure, through interviews, revealed that trainees were content with the money they received and had very little orientation to what would happen after the money ran out. That this was an opportunity to "build their future by developing skill literacy", was not considered important at all!

### ***IS SOCIAL INEQUALITY THE CAUSE?***

Much has been said about the social inequalities in India. One point that is of particular relevance to career development issues, is the occurrence of *intergenerational* perpetuation of social positions. The pernicious aspect of this poverty is not merely that some people are poor, but that across generations, these people show minimal movement from the bottom of the scale. The absence of *opportunities*, has often been proffered as the main cause for this lack of upward mobility. Young people from the lower socioeconomic status groups do not have the opportunity to learn a skill or trade and remain skill illiterate. However, Indian social scientists, describe the economically disadvantaged to be a part of a *culture of poverty*, characterised by attitudes of apathy, indifference and withdrawal. Extrapolating from here, it seems, the absence of opportunities is compounded by various *attitudinal* and *behavioural* variables. The Indian adolescent from low socioeconomic status backgrounds seems to be under the combined influence of both *work skill deficits* and *self management skills*. The joint action of this *combined skill deficit profile*, places them on a life trajectory of chronic unemployment.

## ***IDEAS FOR INTERVENTIONS:***

Vocational habilitation / rehabilitation programmes have *traditionally* focussed on programmes for work skills training. Typically, governmental and non-governmental initiatives attempt to deal with the problems of unemployment by providing training programmes in specific trades. These programmes make a significant contribution to preparing young people for employment. Two points however remain unaddressed, namely, *student persistence* in the programme and *success in employment*.

## ***Reasons for Recruitment and Job Loss:***

Over the last few years, career development experts have begun to address the critical issue of *employment survival*. Following this lead, one of our studies interviewed approximately 244 owners of small scale industries (potential employers) in an attempt to isolate reasons for *successful employment* and reasons linked to *job loss*. Two interesting points emerged.

1. Employers viewed skills related to *actual production* as the most important variable for *recruitment*. Prospective employees, who demonstrated the definite presence of skill (e.g.: filing, cutting, drawing, marking, drilling, ability to handle a lathe machine, etc.), were given a job with little hesitation. This was true, even if the applicant did not show complete mastery over these skills.
2. The reasons these employers cited for *firing* employees, was *not* as much associated with work skills deficits, as with self management skills. New recruits from low skill literacy backgrounds, most frequently lost their jobs because their work *attendance* was poor, they were not *punctual*, they were *unreliable* and *dishonest* and were unable to *get along* with others on the shop floor.

## ***SELF EFFICACY TRAINING (SET): Interventions to Develop Skill Literacy:***

In conclusion let me cite Self Efficacy Training as an example of an intervention for skill literacy development. We designed this intervention to address both *employment preparation* and *employment survival* skills. At one level, trainees were prepared in the *work skills* related to three trades: Turning, Fitting Welding and Tailoring. They were simultaneously provided with *self efficacy enhancement* inputs. These inputs addressed various self management issues such as: their attitudes toward themselves, their lives and their future. Training included reasons for drop out, orientation to prosperity, the importance of delaying need gratification, inoculation against failure and aspects related to work culture such as reliability, honesty, good work attendance, punctuality, dependability on the job, and safety awareness. Students were also prepared with job finding skills. Students went through training for approximately six months, after which they "graduated" and began to look for a job. Follow up revealed that our trainees showed greater ease in finding a job. Most importantly, they showed a significantly higher level of employment survival. Interviews with employers once again confirmed that it was a *combination* of work skills along with self efficacy skills, that linked the individual to sustained, gainful employment.

In summary the SET intervention took a two-pronged approach. Each day in the training programme was divided into two parts. The first half of the day focused on attitudes to self and

the future. Trainees were exposed to core work attitudes (e.g. punctuality, reliability, safety, minimisation of waste).

Self-efficacy for specific work tasks was promoted through simulations and role-plays. During the second half of the day, trainees were placed in various industries to learn specific industrial skills. The programme attempted to break the vicious cycle of failure in school, leading to unskilled employment, which further led to low incomes and low motivation.

Self-Efficacy Training used the non-formal training format to provide a career development bridge to move unskilled young people toward acquiring higher work skills. At the end of the programme trainees received certificates indicating their work experience and skill development. Almost all trainees were able to secure better jobs and went on to complete formal education.

## **CONCLUSION:**

These findings suggest that programmes dealing with unemployment amongst disadvantaged youth, must be two pronged. While vocational training should focus on increasing the young person's work skills, inputs must simultaneously be directed toward attitudinal change and skills related to self efficacy. If skill literacy is to be enhanced, it is vital that the young person is given the opportunity and the necessary inputs to develop skills on both fronts. This is the young person, who has been truly empowered, to break free from the cycle of poverty and soar into the skies of fruitful employment.

***GIDEON ARULMANI.***