

‘The Indian Express’ Investigation of India’s Toppers: Seven ‘Takeaways’ for Betterment of Education System

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
EDU-2021-09033850

Volume: 9

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2320-2653

E-ISSN: 2582-1334

Received: 19.03.2021

Accepted: 24.04.2021

Published: 01.06.2021

Citation:
Misra, Pradeep. “‘The Indian Express’ Investigation of India’s Toppers: Seven ‘Takeaways’ for Betterment of Education System.” *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2021, pp. 268-272.

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v9i3.3850>



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Pradeep Misra

Professor, Department of Education, CCS University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9164-6071>

Abstract

The Indian Express, an English Daily, investigated the progression of 86 national school Board toppers (51 men and 35 women) during the two-decade of 1996-2015. The investigation consisted of toppers of Class X and XII (from the Central Board of Secondary Education and the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations). It was published in three parts (The Indian Express, December 27-28-29, 2020). As a follow-up of the major findings of the investigation, this article proposes seven ‘takeaways’ for the betterment of India’s education system.

Keywords: School toppers, India, India’s toppers, Education system, Takeaways, Education, School education

Background

The Indian Express, an English Daily, investigated the progression of 86 national school Board toppers (51 men and 35 women) during the two decades of 1996-2015. The investigation consisted of toppers of Class X and XII (from the Central Board of Secondary Education and the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations). It was published in three parts by The Indian Express (Chopra 2020). The investigation highlighted several trends and issues based on the choices and voices of the toppers. Most of the 86 national Board toppers, tracked down by ‘The Indian Express’ as part of a four-month investigation, opined that while their marks and ranks may have given them a head start, but looking back, they now see crucial gaps in their schooling and the way they were taught.

The survey of Board toppers revealed that about two-thirds of them had left the country for higher studies. The majority of them have chosen IITs as a launching pad for progressing to higher education abroad. The survey also highlighted that the US was the most favored destination for those toppers, who opted to leave, but as usual, girls lag in this quest. As another notable finding, the survey presented that students from outside metros are leading the pack, which means regularly emerging as toppers. The toppers also voiced that their schools in India mainly stuck to the textbook-based teaching and could not prepare them for challenges awaiting them outside the school boundary. Through this investigation, the toppers also regretted that their school had never briefed them on options available post-school, loan programs, and choice of colleges and careers and futures.

During present times, when media houses, both print and electronic, hardly talk or report about the educational issues and affairs, this investigation from the team of ‘The Indian Express’ deserves much praise. This patience and perseverance to pursuing the school toppers of last 20 years to tell their ‘Mann Ki Baat’ on their schooling of past, and life in the present, is a great service for

the education community. The stories emancipated from the school toppers are vital to decode the existing trends in the Indian schooling system in particular and the education system in general. As a researcher, the reading of the published reports motivated me to reflect upon how the voices and experiences of school toppers can be utilized to make amends and improve the existing education system in India. As an outcome of my reflection, I propose the following seven ‘takeaways’ to consider major stakeholders of the education system in India (e.g., teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers).

Takeaway 1# Establish School Student Career Counselling Centres

Responding to this investigation, several toppers admitted that they were not aware of the alternative courses or career paths after leaving their schools. Hence, they have to choose from what they know or suggested by their family members. As reported in the newspaper, “Many wish they had exposure to other professions or career counseling at that age.” This is not only a wish of school toppers but a wish of almost every school-leaving child in India. The existing education system hardly offers any institutionalized mechanism to guide and counsel school students, in general, regarding future career paths, educational opportunities, available courses, and educational institutions. The students have to rely mainly on their parents, teachers, relatives, and seniors for this purpose. And there is no denying that all these personnel counsel students based on their experiences and choices rather than their professional expertise. As a result, students, year after year, are offered routine and old-fashioned career pieces of advice rather than something path-breaking or existing.

The time has come that policymakers for the education sector must realize that getting a proper career and academic guidance is not only the demand of toppers but the right of every school child of India too. To grant the wish of career guidance to every schoolchild, especially for those leaving Class XI or XIII, the Central and State Governments may plan to establish ‘School Student Career Counselling Centres’ in every district of India. These centers, headed by an expert career counselor, may be

mandated to advise and guide the student on the future academic path and career choices via online and offline mode. Such an arrangement will help the school children get expert advice and shape the future academic journey accordingly. Besides, one or two teachers from every school may be trained through a short-term course on career guidance and counseling. Once trained, these teachers may be given the responsibility to counsel and guide the students.

Takeaway 2# Create Collaborative Learning Environments

‘Working together and learning with each other is one of the success mantras to succeed and prosper in this Century. Contrary to this, our education system mostly offers individual-centric teaching-learning. Teachers deliver lectures, students grasp them at their own pace and convenience, reproduce the content in examinations, get evaluated, and declared passed. There is hardly any opportunity for students to have academic interaction and collaboration with teachers and among peers. But this is an outdated and failed scheme for any meaningful learning, as observed by a topper in the investigation, “At MIT, professors encourage students to talk to each other and work on homework together. This kind of trust was mostly absent at my undergraduate institute back in India.” The message is clear; educational institutions must work on creating collaborative and joyful learning environments.

To promote engaging and collaborative learning environments in classrooms, specific efforts will be needed at the level of policymakers, educational institutions, and teachers. To begin with, the policymakers may take the lead by suggesting a school curriculum focusing more on meaningful and collaborative learning rather than individual grasping and memorizing concepts and contents. The school leadership may bring a change, in the existing teaching-learning process, by declaring some class periods every week as collaborative learning periods. During these periods, instead of teacher talks, students may be encouraged to discuss, share, and learn together on a given topic. And, most importantly, the teachers have to accept the philosophy of collaborative learning and learn

different ways to promote and practice collaborative learning in their classrooms.

Takeaway 3# Make Public Speaking and Reporting Compulsory

Reporting and speaking are two vital life skills to be successful and productive in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the textbook-based education system of our schools or even higher education institutions hardly prepares students on these aspects; as noted in the report, “Toppers admit schools stuck to textbooks, didn’t prepare them for what lies outside.” In the prevailing education system, students are hardly allowed to speak or debate in classes or public forums and only selected interested ones get the opportunity for expressing their views in public in the form of speaking. Similarly, only a handful dares to write articles or short notes on academic subjects or life in general. The other notable aspect is that public writing during school days is mainly confined to writing (or searching) some pieces for school magazines. In a way, most school students lack the basic skills of presenting their views scientifically and logically in public, by speaking or writing.

Taking note of these observations, educational institutions may look out to give every student enough opportunities to practice public speaking and writing for the masses. As a simple initiative, students may be given opportunities to take classes periodically, on a chosen theme, in place of the teacher. The students may also be provided some suitable content for further analysis, taking notes, and presenting the summary of content for wider dissemination. The students may also be encouraged to present their views in the form of short writes ups or blogs and share these on social media platforms. Schools may also provide opportunities and possibilities, in the form of day-to-day learning activities, to engage every student in writing and speaking regularly. Besides, the educational institutions may also move from ‘questions for answers’ to ‘situations and data for reflection and reporting’ learning style. All these initiatives will help the students to develop the ability to critically reflect, evaluate, and present their views with confidence by oral and written means.

Takeaway 4# Offer’ Study Abroad and Comeback’ Scholarships

The investigation has highlighted that among 86 toppers, over half have opted to study abroad. There is no secret that if one moves to study abroad on own finances, he/she has no compulsion to come back and serve the country. And this is happening in reality; the investigation showed that most of the toppers who moved abroad for studying are either working there or engaged in further studies. This situation compels the policymakers to think from a different perspective. Instead of curbing the tendency of students to move abroad for better education, the policymakers have to find ways to use the tendency of students, to move abroad for further education for the betterment of the country. A new policy may be helpful in this regard.

The policymakers may work on a scheme where those going abroad may have a reason and commitment to return after completing the studies abroad. To make it happen, the government may launch a ‘Study abroad and Comeback Scholarship’ for meritorious students from different boards (including state boards). This scholarship may be offered to students getting admission in specified and emerging disciplines. Under this scholarship, the recipients may be provided non-refundable financial support to meet their study and living expenses abroad with a condition that they will be back in India and serve the country for a specified period. Such students may also be supported to run their start-ups after coming back. In a way, this scheme will be helpful to get us specialists that are ‘trained abroad’ to serve the country.

Takeaway 5# Motivate Toppers to Join the Teaching Profession

One of the starking revelations from this study is that out of 86 toppers, only two or three opted for teaching as a profession. And those who opted for teaching, except one, are teaching abroad rather than in India. At the same time, global research confirms that bringing the best talent to the teaching profession is the recipe for the success of any education system. For example, in countries like Singapore, Finland, Australia, and Canada, becoming a teacher is the first choice for the top cohort of students. In comparison,

teaching is never a first choice for the majority of the students in India. Interestingly, like previous policy documents, NEP 2020 also calls for bringing the best talent in the teaching profession but did not offer any roadmap.

To attract the best talents of the country towards the teaching profession, the Ministry of Education may work on a specific scheme named ‘Teach in India.’ Under this scheme, the designated government agency may contact school board toppers across India to counsel, motivate, and sign a contract with them to become teachers after completing their higher education in India or abroad. Those wishing to avail of this offer may be provided scholarship for higher studies, a guarantee for an assured teaching position, and admission in a well-designed teacher education program. This scheme will ensure the entry of the best talent into the teaching profession and subsequently improve the quality of the Indian education system.

Takeaway 6# Publish the Success Stories of Girl Toppers

As another significant finding, the study reported a gender gap among schools regarding educational choices and migrating abroad for higher studies. The investigation noticed that “And if you are a girl topper, you are much less likely to move overseas than if you were a boy.” The study also highlighted that in comparison to boys, lesser girls opted for science and technology-related courses, which means the gender gap in STEM subjects prevails at the school level, and even toppers are not prone to it. Therefore, efforts need to be made to phase out this gender gap in terms of educational opportunities.

Considering that, more than any other factor, social mindsets are the prime cause of this situation, educational institutions may organize specific campaigns and drives to counsel and guide parents regarding school and higher education schemes and opportunities for the girl child. The educational institutions and government may also publish success stories of those girls doing excellently in different educational fields for awareness and bringing a change in the psyche and mindset of society. The policymakers must realize that social awareness is the best solution to promote girls’ enrolment and

achievement in STEM subjects, and no one can be a better ambassador for this cause than ‘girls’ school toppers.’

Takeaway 7# Make Research a part of School Culture.

By investigating school toppers, the survey presented two prominent findings regarding research in Indian institutions. First, several toppers left the country mainly to pursue their research interests in other countries. This means they were not satisfied with the available research facilities or opportunities in the Indian institutions and decided to pursue their research interests in institutions abroad. Second, many toppers talked about not getting any research orientation during schooling. This testimony from the school topper conforms that most educational institutions lack a vision for the development of scientific temper and research competencies among students.

Taking a clue from these observations, the government agencies and policymakers may work upon increasing research opportunities and facilities both at schools and higher education institutions. And this needs to be done not for some elite institutions but institutions in general and across the country. To fulfill this promise, a useful measure will be to make ‘research orientation’ an integral part of the schooling. To make research a part of school culture, the curriculum, both at the school and graduate level may be designed in such a way that students will learn the techniques and ethics of research while conducting their day-to-day learning activities. The policymakers must realize that if India has to take the benefit of the demographic dividend for the socio-economic development of the country, the promotion of research culture among students is one of the best ways to achieve it.

Conclusion

The study about School toppers of India by ‘The Indian Express’ published at a very opportune moment as government agencies are working to implement the recommendations of the recently released ‘National Education Policy 2020’. For those involved in the implementation of NEP, it becomes a must to listen to the experiences and concerns

of school toppers of yesteryears and propose amendments to the existing education system accordingly. The above suggested seven ‘takeaways’ that emancipated from the voices and choices of some of the best students from India during the last two decades may significantly help the policymakers improve the Indian education system. In my view, the implementation of the suggested ‘takeaways’ may help in developing an education system capable of ‘nurturing Indian talent in many ways.

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Author Details

Pradeep Misra, Professor, Department of Education, CCS University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India
Email ID: pradeepmsr@yahoo.co.in.