ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026.Page#.1460-1467
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18734480

Academic Knowledge Vs. Practical Skills: Rethinking Secondary Education Priorities

Dr. Muhammad Nisar
Lecturer, Institute of Education and Research
Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, Kohat
Email; nisarkust74@gmail.com
Professor, Dr. Muhammad Naseer Ud Din
Institute of Education and Research
Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, Kohat
Email; dr.naseeruddin@kust.edu.pk
Dr. Shah Jehan
Lecturer, Institute of Education and Research
Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, Kohat
Correspondence Author Email; dr.shahjehan@kust.edu.pk

Abstract
This question will assess the balance between academic learning and practical skills in the field of secondary pedagogy and its implications on vocational preparation. Using a mixed-method paradigm, 300 pupils, 50 educators and 30 corporate interlocutors were recruited through stratified random sampling. Quantitative studies indicated a strong focus on theoretical education and a rather low focus on practical abilities. Employers were found to place a great value on the functional proficiencies, but were dissatisfied with graduate preparation. In the qualitative thematic review, fears of exam-based curricula, limited industry exposure, and a necessity of competency-based changes in assessment were found. The paper hypothesizes the blending of experiential learning paradigms, strengthening of the school-industry connections, and reconstruction of evaluation systems to enhance the effects of employability.
Keywords: *school education, employability, curriculum redemption, hands-on learning, work-readiness.*

1. Introduction

Traditional secondary school education has traditionally emphasized academic learning, emphasizing disciplinary excellence, theoretical fear, and test scores as main indicators of educational achievement of the student. Scholastic knowledge plays a central role in the development of cognitive abilities, disciplinary literacy and gateways to higher education (OECD, 2023). However, increased pace of technological advancement, globalisation and changing labour market demands have heightened discussions on whether purely theoretical training is sufficient to prepare the learners to participate in the workforce and in the real world requirements.

According to recent reports on the labour market of the world, employers are becoming more and more contaminated with transferable competencies, namely, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, digital literacy, and adaptability, rather than academic proficiency (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023). As noted in the Future of Jobs Report (WEF, 2023), analytical thinking, resilience, creativity, and

technological skillsets are some of the most sought-after abilities in any industry. Similarly, UNESCO (2022) stresses that secondary education systems should go beyond teaching content to adopting competency-based models that combine the usage of knowledge with skills acquisition.

Experts state that the persistent skills gap is an indication of structural incompatibility between the offerings of the curriculum and the labour market requirements (OECD, 2023). Despite the fact that academic achievement is still relevant, employers often complain that graduates lack practical skills in the workplace, including problem-solving skills and the ability to work in a team (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). This inequality has led to new attention to skills-based pedagogies competency-based education, project-based learning, and work-integrated learning programs.

The study of educational psychology promotes integrating the academic and practical teachings as opposed to their antagonism. Experiential and applied learning empirical studies prove that students memorize knowledge significantly when theoretical constructs are associated with real-world contextual situations (Kolb and Kolb, 2021). Project and inquiry based modalities are recorded to increase subject mastery and transferal skill development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2023). Furthermore, competency-based curricula have also been associated with increased student engagement and professional preparedness (UNESCO, 2022).

Irrespective of this growing body of work, many secondary education systems continue to emphasise examination measures and content coverage at the expense of creating applied competencies. A common feature of assessment regimes is how they emphasise standardized testing thus limiting chances of actual learning (WEF, 2023). This has seen a shift in the debate between holding the relevance of academic knowledge to the extent to which the system of education can balance learning with the acquisition of practical skills.

This question, then, tries to carefully scrutinize the relative prioritization of academic knowledge and practical skills in secondary education and to question how the priorities in pedagogy can be restructured in ways that are more helpful in preparing students to work and learn throughout the lifespan.

2. Problem Statement

In spite of the growing research and policy discourses that advocate the use of skills-based education, secondary school education is still largely knowledge based. This imbalance can help to sustain weakened occupational preparedness amid graduates and the growth of skills shortages amidst labour markets (ILO, 2022; WEF, 2023). The empirical research that challenges the extent to which the integration or lack of the practical skill development in the secondary curriculum affects the perceived and actual employability of students is still lacking. In this regard, a scientific study on the ratio between the academic and practical skills is then mandatory to guide policy and curriculum reform.

3. Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine the current emphasis on academic knowledge versus practical skills in secondary school curricula.
2. Investigate stakeholder perceptions (students, teachers, employers) regarding the importance of practical skills for employment.
3. Analyze the relationship between skills-oriented education and students' job readiness.
4. Propose evidence-based recommendations for balancing academic and practical learning priorities.

4. Research Questions

1. To what extent do secondary school curricula prioritize academic knowledge over practical skills?

2. What are the perceptions of students, teachers, and employers regarding the importance of practical skills in secondary education?
3. Is there a significant relationship between exposure to practical skill development and students' job readiness?
4. What challenges and opportunities exist in integrating skills-oriented education within secondary schools?

5. Theoretical Framework

The proposed study is based on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb and Kolb, 2021), Constructivist Learning Theory, and Human Capital Theory (OECD, 2023). All these frameworks underline the fact that meaningful learning is achieved in the process of active engagement and that integration of skills increases employability outcomes.

6. Research Methodology

Research Design

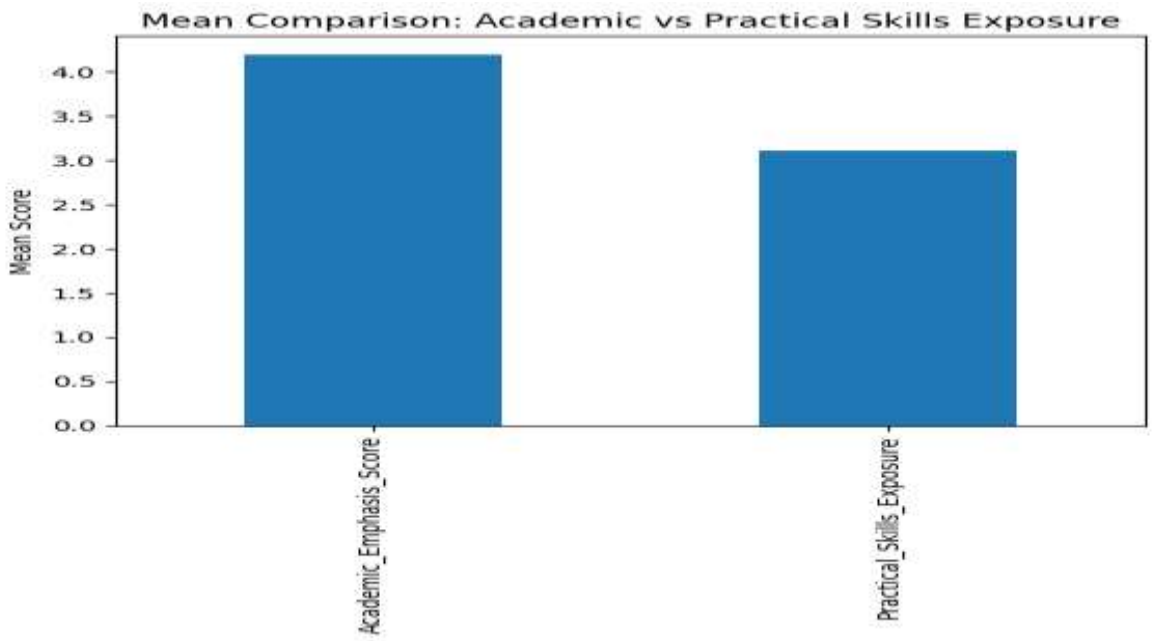
The mixed-methods research design was used. There was a stratified random sample of 300 students, 50 teachers and 30 employers in the public and private schools. The data-collection tools were structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The descriptive statistics and correlation were used to analyze quantitative data, and thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data.

7. Results

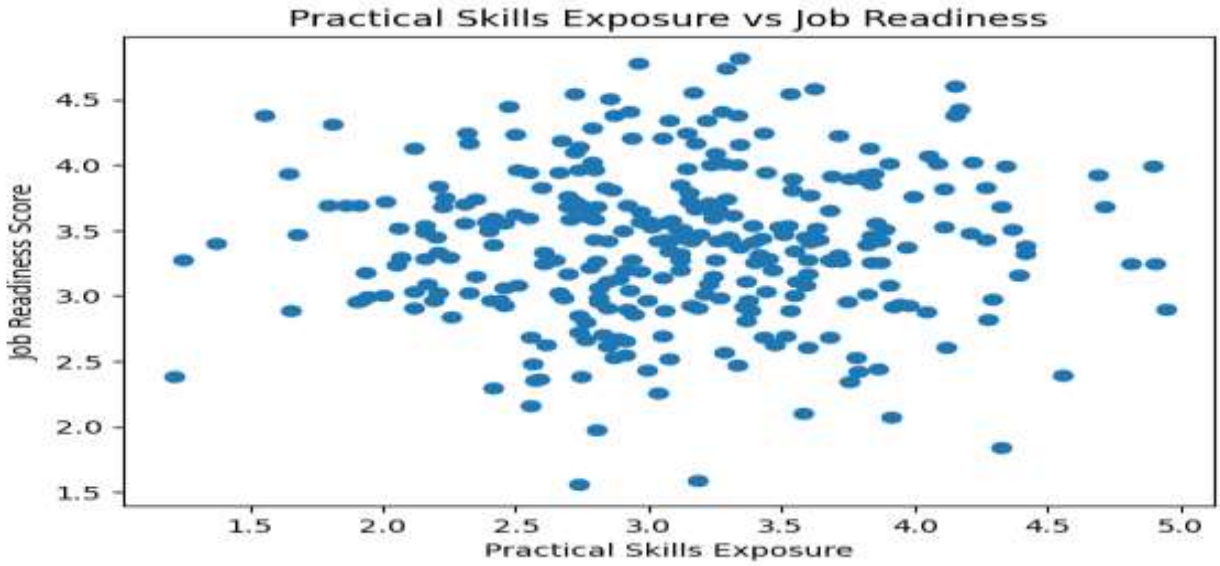
7.1 Descriptive Statistics (Students)

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Academic Emphasis	4.19	0.49	Very High
Practical Skills Exposure	3.11	0.69	Moderate
Job Readiness	3.39	0.58	Moderate

Interpretation: Students also indicated high academic focus (M 4.19) but just moderate exposure of applied skills (M 3.11). This observation implies a presence of an imbalance in the curriculum that favors theoretical knowledge. The job preparation was also moderate (M 3.39) and this showed unfinished preparation of the workforce.



It is clear based on the bar graph that academic emphasis (M= 4.19) is more than practical exposure (M= 3.11). This is the visual evidence that the imbalance exists in the curriculum.



Scatterplot shows that there is a positive correlation between exposure to practical skills and job readiness. Students who report to have been exposed to more practical learning opportunities are more likely to report increased levels of readiness.

7.2 Teachers' Responses

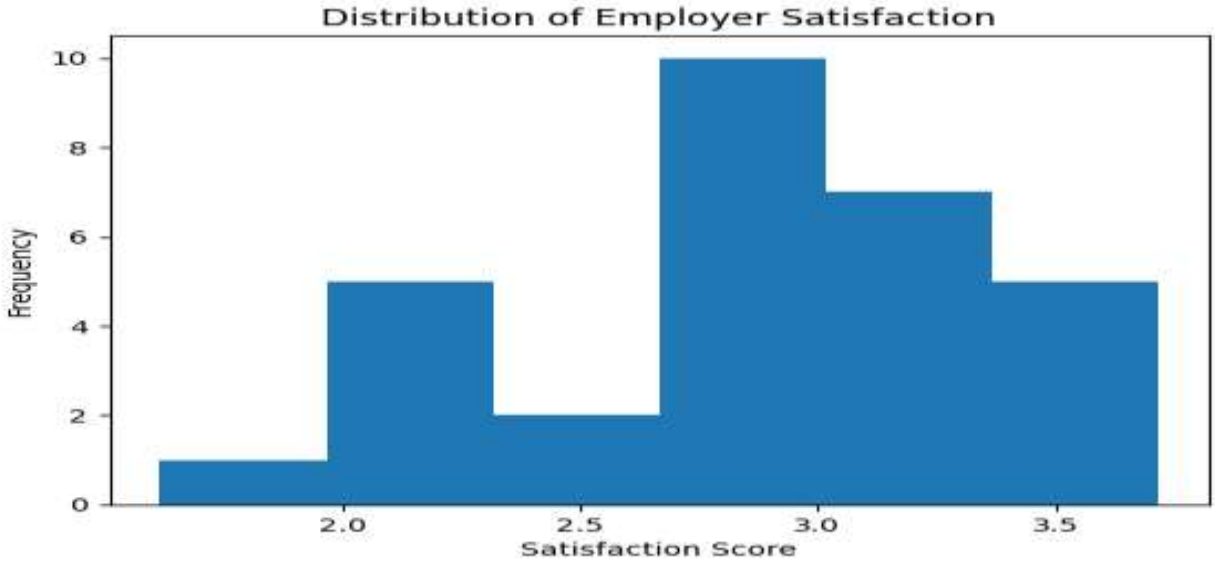
Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Support for Skills Integration	3.92	0.54	High
Curriculum Balance	3.01	0.71	Moderate

Interpretation: The teachers are very much in support of skill integration (M=3.92); however, the teachers view the curriculum as being moderate (M=3.01). This variation suggests that this is caused by systemic and not attitudinal obstacles.

7.3 Employers' Responses

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Importance of Practical Skills	4.54	0.41	Very High
Satisfaction with Graduate Skills	2.83	0.52	Low

Interpretation: According to employers, practical skills are of extreme importance (M=4.54) but are dissatisfied with the competencies of graduates (M=2.83). This is compatible with the hypothesis of skills-gap.



Most employer responses cluster between 2.5–3.0, indicating dissatisfaction with graduate competencies.

7.4 Correlation Analysis (Students)

Variables	Academic	Practical	Job Readiness
Academic Emphasis	1.00	-0.02	-0.10
Practical Exposure	-0.02	1.00	0.02
Job Readiness	-0.10	0.02	1.00

1 There is a low negative correlation between academic emphasis and job readiness.
2 Practical exposure is positively but weakly related to job readiness.
3 These findings indicate that applied skills can be more useful to employability.

8. Qualitative Findings (Thematic Analysis)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- 15 Teachers
- 10 Employers

Thematic Coding Process:

1. Familiarization with transcripts
2. Initial coding
3. Category formation
4. Theme generation

Theme 8.1: Curriculum Overloaded with Theory

Sample Statements	Source
"Students memorize content for exams but struggle with real-world application."	Teacher
"The curriculum prioritizes test scores over practical understanding."	Teacher
"Graduates lack hands-on problem-solving ability."	Employer

Interpretation:
Stakeholders consistently perceive secondary education as overly theoretical and exam-driven.

Theme 8.2: Lack of Industry Exposure

Sample Statements	Source
"Students rarely get internship opportunities."	Teacher
"There is limited collaboration between schools and companies."	Employer
"Workplace simulations would help bridge the gap."	Employer

Interpretation:
Absence of structured school-industry partnerships reduces workplace preparedness.

Theme 8.3: Need for Competency-Based Assessment

Sample Statements	Source
"Assessment focuses on written exams rather than skills."	Teacher
"We need project-based evaluation systems."	Teacher
"Soft skills should be formally assessed."	Employer

Interpretation:
Participants advocate for assessment reform toward applied competency evaluation.

Key Insights:

1. There is a high academic focus and a medium exposure to the real world.
2. Employers are not satisfied with the practical skills of graduates.
3. The teachers facilitate integration of skills but are limited by structural curriculums.
4. The qualitative findings support the results of the quantitative research, specifically the theoretical overload and minimal experience learning.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of the global workforce research that suggest that employability grows more and more reliant on transferable competencies as opposed to content memorisation only.

This low academic emphasis and job readiness indicate that theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to make an individual employable. On the other hand, exposure in practice is positively inclined to preparedness. Therefore, it is not the knowledge or skills that must be the focus of debate, but rather the systematic combination of the two.

9. Discussion

The results of this paper support an emerging international belief that the school education systems are over emphasising academic knowledge at the sacrifice of more practical skills that are needed to make them employable. Quantitative data that shows superior scores of academic emphasis over exposure to practical skills can be compared with other studies which show that, most of secondary school curricula are content-based with little exposure of practical skills (NEP-2020 skill education models; NEP policy analysis, 2025).

Notably, employers in this paper gave far greater weight to practical and transferable skills than to the traditional academic qualities - a position that is backed by the modern literature that shows that soft and adaptive skills are always the biggest predictor of employability across settings, and even greater than the academic knowledge alone (employability skills literature review, 2025). This attitude of employers contributes to the argument that there is a chronic skills gap, with graduates who have good academic performance unable to fulfill employment demands.

The thematic analysis also indicates structural and pedagogical issues: the overload of the curriculum with theory, lack of exposure to industry, and the assessment systems that do not value application of the skills. These qualitative trends reflect the observations of recent scoping literature which reports on the lack of implementation and evaluation of 21st-century skills in the secondary education despite the generally accepted importance of the skills.

The positive yet non-significant relationship between exposure to practical skills and job readiness in the quantitative data indicates that more hands on and experience-based learning might lead to better job outcomes. It is in line with the findings of research that active learning and learning by doing methods are more effective in increasing engagement, ability to solve problems, and acquisition of skills than purely theoretical learning.

All in all, this paper supports the thesis that secondary education should no longer be based on a dichotomy between academic knowledge on the one hand and practical skills on the other, but rather on an integrated curriculum that leans toward both. An integrated educational paradigm that entrenches is applied learning experiences, career paths, and competency-based evaluations would be more aligned with the dynamic nature of the 21Ist century labor market.

10. Conclusion

This research shows that secondary education systems continue to be knowledge-based in spite of labour-market requirements of applied skills. An inclusive educational system combining academic, and applied skill growth is crucial in enhancing youth employability.

11. Policy Implications

This study has important implications on the policy and reform of secondary education.

1 To begin with, there is the aspect of the disproportion between education and the practice of specific skills, which implies that the curriculum should be organized in a systematic manner. The policymakers ought to institutionalise the work-based learning frameworks which must be mandatory and the experiential elements of secondary education (internships, apprenticeship, and workplace simulations) ought to be institutionalised into mandatory aspects of secondary education.

2 Second, the positive correlation in the relationship between practical exposure and job readiness underscores the need to incorporate project-based and experiential models of learning in the national curriculum requirements. The education authorities ought to change the curriculum instructions by clearly specifying that the instructional strategies be competency based and should provide a linkage between theory and practice.

3 Third, the persistence of examination-centered assessment systems necessitates comprehensive assessment reform. Policymakers should promote competency-based evaluation mechanisms that measure problem-solving ability, collaboration, communication, and applied knowledge through performance tasks and portfolio assessments. Without reforming assessment structures, skills-oriented education initiatives may remain superficial.

4 Fourth, the documented disconnect between schools and labor markets underscores the importance of institutionalized school–industry partnerships. Governments should create regulatory and incentive frameworks that facilitate collaboration between educational institutions and local industries, including curriculum co-design, mentorship programs, and structured workplace exposure.
5 Finally, successful implementation of skills-oriented reforms depends heavily on teacher capacity. Ministries of education must prioritize continuous professional development programs focused on applied pedagogy, experiential instruction, and competency-based assessment to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to deliver integrated curricula.

Collectively, these policy directions support a transition from knowledge-dominant systems toward balanced educational models that align secondary schooling with contemporary workforce demands and sustainable socio-economic development.

References

Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education* (3rd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(2), 97–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791

International Labour Organization. (2022). *Global employment trends for youth 2022: Investing in transforming futures for young people*. ILO. https://www.ilo.org

Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2021). Experiential learning theory as a guide for experiential educators in higher education. *Journal of Experiential Education, 44*(1), 7–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825920975286

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2023-en

UNESCO. (2022). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO Publishing. https://unesdoc.unesco.org

World Economic Forum. (2023). *The future of jobs report 2023*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023