



Ikigai in Indian education: A framework for purpose-driven learning

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Abstract

In an era of rapidly changing educational and career environment, traditional approaches in India often fail to align with students' passions, talents, and aspirations, resulting in disengagement, low motivation, and poor mental health. This paper examines the integration of ikigai, a Japanese concept meaning "reason for being," into the Indian education system as a framework for purposeful, student-centered learning. Drawing on established theories of motivation, self-actualization, experiential learning and career construction, the study demonstrates how ikigai can enhance intrinsic motivation, promote self-awareness, and connect students' education to societal needs. The paper critically analyzes persistent challenges, including rigid academic streams, societal expectations, and disparities in educational resources, and proposes a comprehensive model for integrating ikigai through curriculum design, personalized counseling, mentorship and experiential learning opportunities. By adopting ikigai principles, Indian education can move toward a more holistic and flexible approach that nurtures individuality, reduces academic stress and prepares learners for meaningful, fulfilling careers. The study concludes with a vision for an education system that empowers students to discover their unique purpose and contribute positively to society.

Keywords: Ikigai, purpose-driven education, Indian education system, intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, holistic learning, career guidance

Introduction

In a world where educational and career pathways are changing rapidly, traditional approaches to education often fail to address individual aspirations or support meaningful personal development. The concept of *ikigai*, a Japanese term meaning "reason for being," offers a valuable framework for rethinking education to align more closely with students' passions, talents, and the needs of society. Ikigai represents the intersection of what one loves, what one is good at, what the world needs, and what one can be paid for. Internationally, it has been recognized for its ability to enhance motivation, promote well-being and provide a sense of purpose (Garcia & Miralles, 2016; Mogi, 2018) ^[2, 7]. However, its application within formal education systems, especially in India, remains largely unexplored.

The Indian education system, even after recent reforms, continues to place a strong emphasis on rote memorization, rigid academic streams, and examination-driven assessments. Many students feel pressured to pursue traditional career options due to parental expectations and societal norms, which often override their personal interests and strengths. This disconnect can lead to disengagement, lack of motivation, poor mental health, and limited satisfaction in professional life.

Evidence highlights widespread dissatisfaction among Indian students regarding their chosen fields of study, along with notable skill gaps that affect employability and long-term success (India Skills Report, 2023) ^[3]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes these challenges and calls for a holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary approach to education that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and self-awareness. Achieving these goals requires the adoption of effective frameworks and strategies that enable students to identify their interests, develop their abilities, and connect their aspirations to real-world opportunities. Ikigai provides an opportunity to reimagine education as a journey of self-discovery, where students can

explore their passions, build relevant skills and align their personal goals with societal needs. Integrating ikigai into curricula and counseling practices can help educators support students in pursuing purposeful careers, increasing motivation, and reducing academic stress.

This paper examines the relevance of ikigai as a guiding framework within the Indian education system. It explores how the principles of ikigai can address the gap between students' aspirations and educational outcomes. Through an analysis of existing challenges and practical strategies for integration, this study aims to offer actionable recommendations for educators, counselors, and policymakers to foster a more purpose-driven approach to learning in India.

Theoretical Framework

A strong theoretical foundation is essential for understanding how ikigai can be meaningfully integrated into education. This paper draws upon established theories of motivation, self-actualization, and purpose, which emphasize the critical role of personal meaning in learning and development.

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** (Maslow, 1943) ^[5], provides a key underpinning for this study. According to Maslow, individuals achieve self-actualization only after satisfying lower-order needs. Ikigai closely aligns with the concept of self-actualization, encouraging individuals to find personal meaning and purpose in their activities, which can lead to greater satisfaction and fulfillment both academically and professionally.
- **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** (Deci and Ryan, 1985), highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomy in promoting engagement and well-being. When students are encouraged to pursue activities that resonate with their interests and values, they are more likely to experience sustained motivation

and satisfaction. Ikigai directly supports this by helping students connect their studies to their passions, fostering greater ownership of their educational journeys.

- **Experiential Learning Theory** (Kolb, 1984) [4], emphasizes that learning occurs through reflecting on experiences and applying those insights to new situations. Ikigai encourages ongoing self-reflection about one's strengths, passions, and contributions to society, making it highly compatible with experiential learning approaches. By integrating ikigai, educators can create opportunities for students to relate classroom experiences to their personal goals and broader societal needs.
- **Career Construction Theory** (Savickas, 2005) [8], provides another relevant lens, suggesting that individuals build their careers through processes of meaning-making, crafting life stories that reflect personal values and social contributions. Ikigai offers a structured way for students to identify what they love, what they excel at, and how they can contribute meaningfully to society, supporting the career construction process.

Together, these theories highlight how purpose, self-awareness, and meaning are essential for deep learning and personal growth. They establish a solid conceptual basis for proposing ikigai as a framework to enhance motivation, engagement, and holistic development in the Indian education system.

Challenges in The Indian Educational Context

Despite reforms and a growing emphasis on holistic education, several persistent challenges continue to limit students in India from discovering and pursuing their ikigai. The Indian education system often prioritizes rote memorization and examination-oriented teaching, leaving little space for creativity, exploration, or self-reflection.

A significant barrier is societal and parental pressure, which strongly influences students' academic and career choices. Many students are directed into conventional fields such as engineering, medicine, or civil services based on prestige and perceived job security, rather than personal interests or aptitudes. This external pressure can create a disconnect between students' innate passions and their educational paths, resulting in disengagement, low motivation, and dissatisfaction.

Rigid academic streams present another challenge. Once students select a stream typically science, commerce, or humanities after class 10, they have limited opportunities to change or explore interdisciplinary interests. This lack of flexibility contradicts the adaptability needed for students to identify and pursue their ikigai. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 encourages multidisciplinary learning, practical implementation remains inconsistent and slow.

The limited availability of effective career counseling further compounds the problem. Many schools lack trained counselors or provide guidance narrowly focused on conventional careers, offering little support for students to explore diverse interests, assess their strengths, or

understand potential pathways that align with their passions and societal needs.

Cultural stigma surrounding non-traditional careers also discourages students from considering fields like performing arts, sports, social entrepreneurship, or creative industries, even when these align closely with their ikigai. These fields are often undervalued, resulting in missed opportunities for students to build meaningful and fulfilling careers.

Inequities in educational resources, especially between urban and rural areas, exacerbate these challenges. Students in rural or under-resourced schools often have limited access to exposure programs, mentorship, or skill development opportunities that could help them discover and nurture their interests.

These challenges underscore the urgent need for frameworks like ikigai, which can help students align their education with their unique passions, skills, and societal contributions. Addressing these systemic and cultural barriers through purposeful interventions is essential to support purpose-driven learning and empower students across diverse educational settings in India.

Ikigai As A Framework for Purpose-Driven Education

Ikigai, which reflects the intersection of what an individual love, what they are good at, what the world needs, and what they can be paid for, offers a powerful and holistic framework for transforming education into a purposeful, student-centered experience. By applying ikigai principles, the focus of Indian education can shift from rote learning and high-stakes examinations to fostering intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, and alignment between students' aspirations and societal needs. Each component of ikigai aligns naturally with core educational goals:

- **What you love (Passion):** Encouraging students to identify and engage with subjects and activities that genuinely interest them promotes intrinsic motivation. When learning connects with students' passions, it fosters curiosity, deeper engagement, and sustained interest, leading to more meaningful educational experiences.
- **What you are good at (Vocation):** Helping students recognize and develop their strengths builds confidence and competence. Educational strategies that identify individual aptitudes and support skill development enable students to excel in areas where they show potential, enhancing both academic performance and self-efficacy.
- **What the world needs (Mission):** Integrating discussions of societal issues and community needs into the curriculum helps students develop a sense of social responsibility. Understanding how their knowledge and abilities can contribute to addressing real-world challenges encourages students to pursue goals beyond personal achievement, fostering empathy and civic engagement.
- **What you can be paid for (Profession):** Exposing students to a broad range of career opportunities and helping them understand pathways to sustainable livelihoods ensures that their passions and talents can lead to economically viable futures. Linking education

with employability enhances the relevance of learning and addresses persistent skill gaps.

Aligning these four elements within educational programs can guide students toward purposeful academic and professional paths. This approach resonates strongly with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary education aimed at nurturing creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Adopting ikigai as a guiding framework can help shift the Indian education system from a uniform, examination-focused approach to one that nurtures each student's individuality, motivation, and sense of purpose. This transformation holds the potential to enhance engagement, reduce academic stress, and better prepare learners to lead fulfilling lives while making meaningful contributions to society.

Proposed Implementation Model for Integrating Ikigai Into Indian Schools

Effectively embedding ikigai into the Indian education system requires a structured, phased approach spanning awareness, self-discovery, curriculum, mentorship, and evaluation. The following model provides a practical roadmap for educators, school leaders, and policymakers.

1. Building Awareness and Sensitization

- **Educator and Administrator Workshops:** Introduce ikigai concepts, their relevance to holistic education, and alignment with NEP 2020 goals.
- **Parent Engagement:** Organize interactive sessions to sensitize parents to the value of aligning education with students' interests and talents, reducing external pressures.
- **Student Orientation:** Use age-appropriate activities such as storytelling, games, and discussions to introduce ikigai and the importance of purpose in learning.

2. Structured Self-Discovery Programs

- **Interest and Aptitude Assessments:** Implement standardized tools from middle school onward to help students identify passions, strengths, and personal values.
- **Reflective Practices:** Incorporate guided journaling and discussions into classes, encouraging students to regularly reflect on what they love, excel at, and care about.
- **Personal Ikigai Maps:** Support students in creating individual diagrams that visualize the intersection of their passions, skills, societal needs, and career possibilities.

3. Curriculum Integration

- **Interdisciplinary Projects:** Design project-based assignments tied to real-world issues aligned with students' interests, fostering deeper engagement and practical learning.
- **Flexible Electives:** Offer a broad range of elective subjects and extracurricular activities across arts,

sciences, entrepreneurship, and social work, allowing students to explore diverse fields.

- **Contextual Themes:** Embed themes of purpose, empathy, and social contribution into existing subjects through case studies, debates, and collaborative activities.

4. Personalized Career Guidance and Mentorship

- **Individual Counseling Plans:** Provide tailored counseling to help students connect their self-discovery insights with educational and career pathways.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Establish networks of mentors from varied professions to guide students, share real-world experiences, and broaden their understanding of unconventional career options.

5. Experiential Learning Opportunities

- **Internships and Shadowing:** Partner with local businesses, startups, and NGOs to offer hands-on learning experiences that expose students to practical applications of their interests.
- **Service-Learning Projects:** Encourage participation in community service aligned with students' passions, fostering empathy, civic responsibility, and real-world skills.
- **Industry and Expert Interactions:** Organize guest lectures, panel discussions, and field visits to inspire students and provide insights into different professions.

6. Professional Development for Educators

- **Ikigai-Focused Teacher Training:** Develop professional development programs equipping educators with skills to facilitate student self-discovery, guide reflective conversations, and design ikigai-aligned learning experiences.
- **Reflective Practice for Teachers:** Encourage educators to explore their own ikigai, enhancing empathy and authenticity when mentoring students.

7. Assessment and Evaluation Mechanisms

- **Motivation and Engagement Surveys:** Regularly measure student engagement, well-being, and satisfaction with their educational experiences.
- **Holistic Portfolios:** Use student portfolios to document reflections, projects, evolving ikigai maps, and achievements beyond traditional academics.
- **Progress Reviews:** Conduct periodic meetings with students, parents, and teachers to review interests, evolving goals, and educational pathways.

8. Policy and Infrastructure Support

- **Flexible Academic Policies:** Advocate for policies allowing changes in subjects or streams, enabling students to adapt their education to evolving interests.
- **Resource Centers:** Create dedicated spaces equipped with career exploration materials, self-assessment tools, and multimedia resources for self-directed learning.

- **Digital Platforms:** Develop or adopt online platforms offering interest inventories, mentorship matching, and curated resources to support students' ikigai journeys.
- 9. Continuous Improvement and Scaling**
- **Pilot Programs:** Launch pilots in diverse settings i.e. urban, semi-urban, and rural schools to test and refine implementation strategies.
 - **Data-Driven Adjustments:** Collect and analyze data on outcomes to identify best practices and address challenges.
 - **Policy Advocacy and Collaboration:** Work with education boards and government agencies to scale successful models and embed ikigai principles into mainstream education.

Potential Challenges and Limitations

While integrating ikigai into the Indian education system holds significant promise for fostering purpose-driven learning, several challenges and limitations must be addressed to ensure effective and sustainable implementation.

- Cultural and societal barriers remain among the most significant obstacles. Deep-seated preferences for conventional careers in fields such as engineering, medicine, and government services often shape parental expectations and community attitudes, creating resistance when students express interest in unconventional or creative pursuits. Careers in areas like the arts, sports, social entrepreneurship, or emerging fields are frequently undervalued, which discourages students from exploring paths that align with their genuine interests and strengths.
- The rigidity of existing educational structures also constrains opportunities for students to discover and pursue their ikigai. Despite the National Education Policy 2020's call for flexibility and multidisciplinary learning, many schools continue to enforce rigid academic streams beginning in senior secondary grades, limiting students' ability to engage in interdisciplinary exploration or switch fields based on evolving interests. Moreover, the education system's enduring focus on examination-driven assessments emphasizes rote memorization over critical thinking, reflection, and creativity, leaving little space for learning experiences that nurture self-awareness and intrinsic motivation.
- Insufficient guidance and support further hinder the practical integration of ikigai principles. A significant number of schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas, lack qualified career counselors who can help students identify connections between their passions, talents, and potential career pathways. Teachers, while often well-intentioned, are frequently burdened with large class sizes and administrative responsibilities, limiting their capacity to offer personalized support or facilitate reflective learning processes.
- Disparities in resources and infrastructure intensify these challenges. Students in rural or marginalized communities often have limited access to diverse

electives, extracurricular programs, mentorship opportunities, or exposure to varied professions, all of which are essential for helping them explore their interests and aptitudes. Additionally, the digital divide continues to restrict the use of technology-based tools such as online self-assessment platforms or virtual mentorship programs that can play a vital role in facilitating ikigai discovery.

- Challenges related to implementation consistency and systemic adoption also pose significant limitations. Variability in leadership commitment, institutional priorities, and resource allocation across schools leads to uneven uptake of purpose-driven educational practices. Furthermore, while policy frameworks like the NEP 2020 emphasize holistic and student-centered education, translating these visions into consistent, everyday classroom practices remains a substantial challenge due to entrenched norms and limited institutional capacity for change.
- Difficulties in assessment present another limitation. Concepts such as purpose, self-awareness, and intrinsic motivation are inherently complex and subjective, making them challenging to evaluate through traditional quantitative measures. The absence of reliable, standardized assessment tools for these outcomes further complicates efforts to collect meaningful data, assess program effectiveness, and advocate for broader policy support.
- Time constraints within overcrowded curricula pose practical obstacles to ikigai integration. Teachers often struggle to cover required academic content, leaving little flexibility for implementing reflective activities, project-based learning, or experiential opportunities that are crucial for helping students identify and develop their ikigai.
- Ensuring sustainability and scalability presents a critical challenge. Without sustained commitment from school leaders, educators, and communities, efforts to integrate ikigai principles risk losing momentum over time, particularly in the face of staff turnover or shifting institutional priorities. Moreover, adapting successful pilot programs for diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts across India requires thoughtful planning and locally sensitive strategies, which can complicate widespread implementation.

Despite these limitations, many of these challenges can be addressed through targeted strategies, including engaging parents and communities to shift mindsets, designing flexible pilot programs, providing professional development for educators, building partnerships to bridge resource gaps, and creating adaptable frameworks suited to India's diversity. Recognizing and proactively addressing these obstacles is essential for developing practical, equitable, and sustainable approaches to integrating ikigai into the Indian education system, ultimately empowering students to pursue purposeful, fulfilling educational and professional paths.

Conclusion

Integrating ikigai into the Indian education system offers a transformative pathway to move beyond rote learning and examination-centered practices toward education that truly

nurtures individuality, curiosity, and purpose. By aligning students' passions and strengths with meaningful contributions to society, ikigai has the potential to bridge the persistent gap between rigid educational structures and the diverse aspirations of learners. Purpose-driven education can foster deeper engagement, greater well-being, and improved readiness for the dynamic demands of modern careers.

While cultural expectations, systemic rigidity, and resource inequities pose significant challenges, these barriers are not insurmountable. Through thoughtful curriculum design, effective mentorship, equitable access to guidance, and sustained collaboration among educators, parents, policymakers, and communities, ikigai can become a practical and powerful framework for reimagining Indian education. Proactive strategies that empower students to explore, reflect, and connect their learning to personal and societal needs will be essential for realizing this potential. We envision an Indian education system where every student is inspired and empowered to discover their unique ikigai i.e. pursuing what they love, polish what they excel at, addressing what the world needs, and building meaningful, sustainable livelihoods. In this future, schools will become spaces of exploration and growth, teachers will guide students toward purpose, and learning will evolve into a lifelong journey of curiosity, confidence and contribution. By embracing ikigai, we can cultivate generations of learners who lead fulfilling lives and contribute to a more compassionate, innovative, and resilient society.

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