

INTERVIEW

Professor Michel Danino: 'The Curriculum Question'

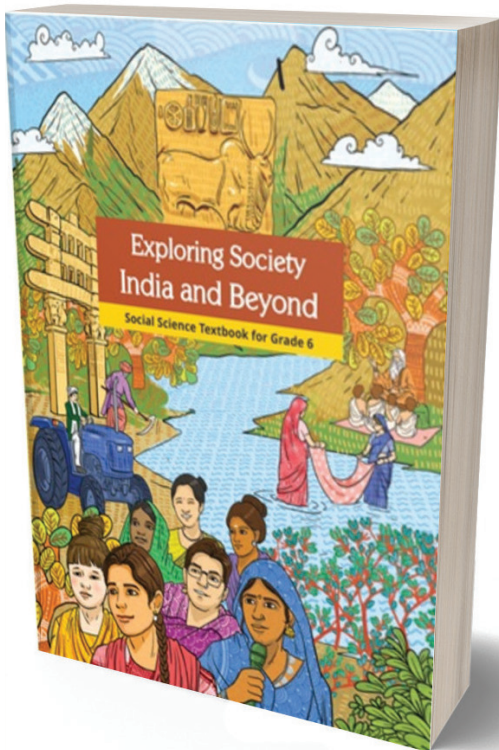
Q. How can curricular changes effectively tackle the current educational challenges, particularly the learning crisis? What specific reforms could create meaningful, long-term improvements?

Prof. Danino: The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the National Curriculum for School Education (NCF-SE 2023) address this issue directly by emphasising a shift in the pedagogical approach along with the curricular reforms. However, for any transformation in education to be truly effective, there must also be a comprehensive reform in the way students are evaluated—specifically, a complete overhaul of the current examination system because, unless this system itself is changed to align with the new pedagogical approach, the effectiveness of any preceding reforms will be limited.

Q. What does NEP 2020 try to do in this regard?

It tries to get back to the essentials—that is, focusing in any discipline on what the "essentials" are that we truly want the child to absorb. This also means that the existing curriculum, syllabus, and content need to be drastically reduced. If this reduction is not achieved, we will continue overloading the child, eventually forcing a return to rote learning. Therefore, the first step is to streamline content by prioritising only the essential concepts, principles or "big ideas".

The second step is to ensure that the child is continuously engaged in reflection. In fact, NCERT's new Grade 6 Social Science textbook is designed around these key principles.



The new NCERT Grade 6 Social Science textbook promotes continuous reflection. Through the fictional village of Lakshmanpur, students critically explore real-life challenges like water shortages, damaged roads, and school maintenance—grappling with decision-making and resource allocation within real-world constraints.

There must also be ample opportunity to ask students questions that encourage deeper thinking and engagement. However, if the content remains excessive, this approach becomes unfeasible. This is why both principles—reducing content to essentials and fostering inquiry—must go hand in hand.

Besides, the engagement is deep and meaningful. While some earlier textbooks attempted this, they often resulted in an artificial conversational style that failed to achieve the intended objectives because the content load remained unchanged. The core goal should be to engage children deeply and continuously stimulate their critical thinking.

In social science, for example, it is essential to show students that many questions remain unanswered, that there are things we don't fully know, and that multiple perspectives can exist on the same issue. This prevents knowledge from being presented as rigid or absolute and instead encourages inquiry and open-mindedness. Similarly, every discipline must adopt its own distinct approach to ensure that its fundamental concepts are effectively conveyed to students.

Q. The challenging aspect of the first step you mentioned, i.e., the 'reduction of the curriculum'—lies in determining what to 'leave out' and what to 'retain' within the curriculum. Is there a strategy in place to guide the process of identifying the 'essential aspects' of each discipline for different grade levels?

My approach, as also outlined in the NEP 2020, is to not start by focusing on 'what topics to teach' at different grade levels, but rather to begin by asking, 'why should a particular topic be taught?' We need to be able to justify the importance of that topic; otherwise, it should simply be dropped. The next question to consider is also not 'what,' but 'how.' How will we teach what we consider important? Will it be taught through texts, graphics, exercises, or other methods? There are many possible approaches, and NEP 2020 encourages exploring multiple alternative methods using a variety of materials to engage the student with.

In India, however, we face some limitations due to the lack of access to digital and modern technology-based resources. Many schools still do not have access to these materials. As long as these limitations persist, traditional materials, such as textbooks, will remain indispensable.

In any case, it's only after deciding 'why' something has to be taught' and 'how' it should be taught that we should move on to the 'what'—that's the last step. This is something people often struggle to understand, but if we can achieve it, we will be able to address the 'learning crisis.' The answer therefore lies in the NEP 2020 and the curricular reforms it proposes. The key step is addressing the issue of the excessively large syllabus across grades and disciplines. This has to be followed by a realignment of the examination system. Through these reforms the system will be equipped to deliver effectively and given the strong demand for education in India—where education is highly valued, not taken for granted, and where everyone is eager to learn.

Q. You've discussed how curricular reforms should begin by focusing on the 'why' and 'how' questions before deciding on the 'what,' and then reworking the textbooks. Since we are still far from having widespread access to digital materials that can expand learning opportunities, what can be done to develop effective learning materials for our school children?

The present teams of textbook development are working to develop, almost from scratch, new learning materials faithful to the NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE 2023. However, the States have even greater potential: the SCERTs can adapt these materials to their local contexts and develop additional resources; they have much freedom to enhance these resources with regional context and provide continuous professional development for teachers.

At the same time, teachers must understand that the goal is to move beyond mere

reliance on textbooks. In many successful systems abroad, textbooks aren't used in class—they're supplemental for home study, with teachers creating their own materials based on research. Most schools in India are very far from such an ideal practice. States need to help teachers understand that textbooks are just one of many materials in the future of education. This requires a deep commitment to improving teaching standards; in particular, teaching needs to be seen as a highly respectable profession.

Teacher training should be regular, sustained, and meaningful. Currently, it's haphazard, leaving teachers disengaged and passive. Training must be experiential, just as classroom teaching should offer varied experiences to the students. It's crucial for teachers to understand the essentials of their syllabus and learn to develop an experiential teaching plan for any topic. Teachers should be evaluated on this and, if needed, given a pathway to improve. The ultimate goal is to empower teachers to become creators and innovators, rather than machines as is too often the case. Above all, teachers must genuinely enjoy their work, which is the only way to keep students engaged. Simply claiming that the NEP is being implemented won't change much on the ground—until the last child in the last school of the country is impacted, the effort must continue.

The system of school inspections also needs to be reformed, with teacher evaluations conducted by independent observers, as in higher education. Student feedback should be part of this evaluation but not the sole measure, as it could be biased. A combination of feedback from multiple stakeholders is needed, and this process should become routine, with teachers understanding its importance for their career progress. While this may face initial

resistance, public support should eventually help reforms gain traction.



Hands-on learning: Making teacher training experiential and classroom-relevant

If we are serious about overcoming the learning crisis, time must not be wasted; States should focus on improving the overall quality of public schools, which is quite feasible.

Q. How can the NEP contribute towards all these reforms and when can one see the results of the policy recommendations?

The NEP 2020 is a great document, but it's like a beautiful car without wheels. The NCF-SE is one of the wheels; textbooks and other learning materials are another; teacher training a third; and we could say that reform of the evaluation system is the fourth. But it's important to remember that this is just the beginning, and it's a 20-year programme to realise the full potential of the policy. For example, the work on textbooks is just one step in the process; we can't be satisfied with producing good textbooks: we must understand that this is

part of a broader journey. It will take time for the entire system to be reformed.

Q. What would your ideal design for teacher training look like, given that many teachers are bored, unhappy, and feel that those training them often lack the expertise they themselves possess? It seems that the entire pre-service and in-service teacher training system is itself problematic.

I would say, first of all, that teachers should carefully read and reflect upon the NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE 2023. Then, the State DIETs need a complete overhaul, as do the B.Ed. curricula. The teacher orientation programmes should be designed with teachers as active participants. They should be encouraged to innovate, conduct classes, demonstrate their teaching, and receive evaluations and feedback. In all this, objective feedback at every level and every stage is one of the keys.

In France, as I remember, school inspectors would visit classes and observe teachers, informing them of the observation only the day before. This way, there was no extensive preparation time, and the inspectors could watch the teacher in their regular class. The observations were then used to provide constructive feedback to the teachers. In the Indian context, this may need to be done by independent agencies rather than government inspectors.

At the same time, there are excellent examples of government officers who have successfully implemented reforms across the country. I myself saw such a case in Tamil Nadu some 20 years ago under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme. Those are however the exception rather than the rule. One way to scale up such success stories could be to bring genuine

advisors on board; they should not be bureaucrats or government officials but rather from organisations with a proven track record or from respected innovative schools — in other words, educationists with considerable experience at ground level. They could share their ideas, which, with bureaucratic support, could become mainstream. Such advisory boards should have real authority, not just be listened to and forgotten. Governments, both State and Central, must recognise that not all expertise can be found within their departments. Ultimately, it is critical to recognise the urgent need for reforms at multiple levels and understand how committed each stakeholder is to change the entire educational ecosystem.

Q. Is there a specific order in which a state bureaucrat, such as the Principal Secretary of Education, should approach these reforms, or do you think everything is already clearly laid out in the NCF-SE 2023?

Apart from reforming the curricula of DIETs and B.Ed. courses and designing policies and programmes for teacher training, the state-level bureaucracy needs to tackle other major issues: for example, improving school infrastructure is of crying urgency in most States; uprooting absenteeism and corruption is another. Let the bureaucracy deal with such issues, while educationists try to produce quality learning material and set down the parameters of a new pedagogy.

Prof. Michel Danino, has been teaching at IIT Gandhinagar since 2011 and has been the member of Indian Council of Historical Research; he is currently a member of the National Syllabus and Teaching / Learning Material Committee, which oversees the preparation of new school textbooks. In 2017, he was awarded Padma Shri for his work on education and culture.