

The foundational education we impart makes a huge difference

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On 20 October 2022, the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) was released by India's ministry of education. The NCF-FS is one of the most important dimensions in the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and is likely to have a deep impact on the education and overall well-being of our children. So, what is the NCF-FS and why is it so important?

The NEP is reconfiguring our system of schooling. It has created a 4-stage '5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure'. The '5' refers to the first five years of education from ages 3 to 8, called the Foundational Stage, and then ages 8-11 (Preparatory Stage), 11-14 (Middle Stage) and 14-18 (Secondary Stage). The four stages constitute school education and have been determined by the physical (including brain), social and emotional development trajectories of children, which in turn determines what is the most effective educational approach for that stage. In simple terms: as children grow, what they can learn, and how they learn it best, changes. The 4-stage structure is based on the scientific understanding of this phenomenon.

The importance of the Foundational Stage is driven by the deep and long-term implications of the first eight years of a child's life. Research from across the world in multiple relevant disciplines shows that these years are the most critical for lifelong well-being and overall development of individuals—physical, cognitive and socio-emotional. Brain development happens fastest in these years. Neuroscience research tells us that over 85% of an individual's brain development occurs by the age of 6. Thus, 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE), which refers to the care and education of children from birth to eight years, is of central importance to all societies. This recognition has grown steeply in the past two decades, spurring significant investments across countries. For India, the NEP is one of the most important mechanisms for delivering high quality, equitable ECCE to all our children. Children of ages 0-3 are mostly taken care of at home; institutional settings take over from age 3 onwards, so the Foundational Stage addresses ECCE for ages 3-8. This would include pre-schools, kindergartens, nursery, Aanganwadis, etc—all institutions that take care of children ages 3-6, and classes 1 and 2 across all schools.

Before moving on, let's clarify some terms. 'Curriculum' refers to the entire organized experience of students in institutional settings to achieve educational aims. This includes learning and developmental goals, syllabi, content to be taught and learnt, pedagogical

practices and assessment (exams), teaching-learning materials, school and classroom practices, the learning environment, culture of the institution and more. With the diversity of our country and its federal nature, developing and deciding school curricula is the business of states and other institutions. A National Curriculum Framework guides and supports the development of diverse, relevant and effective curricula across the country, while enabling consonance and harmony that would be required. Let us consider a few highlights of the NCF-FS.

First, an integrated curriculum framework for children from ages 3-8 will enable us to address all domains of development—physical, socio-emotional-ethical, cognitive and language as well as literacy, aesthetic and cultural aspects—more effectively. Developing foundational literacy and numeracy is critical for all future learning and the NCF-FS enables us to leverage all five years of the Foundational Stage to achieve this.

Second, the pedagogical approach recommended in the NCF-FS is play-based. It includes conversations, stories, songs and rhymes, music and movement, art and craft, indoor and outdoor games, field trips, being amid nature and playing with materials and toys.

Third, it emphasizes the need for teaching and learning to be situated in the context of the child. This includes use of the child's home language and usage of content such as local and traditional stories, rhymes, songs, materials, and games. It is also about catering to different needs and levels of children, including children with special needs, for learning to be truly inclusive.

Fourth, assessment in the Foundational Stage is seen as an enabler for learning and development. It is imagined as an integral part of the everyday classroom process and largely based on systematic and careful observation of children and analysis of their work — such as craft, projects and simple worksheets.

Fifth, it focuses on building an enabling ecosystem that's necessary to make it all happen. This includes empowering teachers and enabling a supportive academic and administrative support system. It also emphasizes the need to ensure adequate infrastructure and learning resources in each institution.

Finally, the NCF-FS speaks directly to teachers. It focuses on classroom practices with real-life illustrations from a variety of contexts. It is hence relatable and provides realistic pathways for teachers and others.

Full disclosure: I am member of the team that has developed the NCF-FS. Some of the sentences in this column paraphrase the relevant text of the NCF-FS with a few changes.

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