

A magical box has been unveiled to enchant and educate students

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Jaadui Pitaraa literally means magical box. But the word ‘box’ is too plain. It doesn’t capture the connotations of the word ‘*pitaraa*’, which alludes to hidden mysteries and surprises. Combining it with ‘*jaadui*’, magical, enhances those connotations manifold. On 20 February 2023, India’s ministry of education unveiled the Jaadui Pitaraa.

The unveiling was done by the minister of education, but the proceedings thereafter were led by kids between the ages of 4 and 7. Dipping and grabbing into the box, they fished out toys, puzzles, musical instruments, colourful posters, story cards, a few playbooks and a magic trick. Their attention was entirely on the discovered goodies and they were oblivious to being on stage with an audience of over 400 people. After a while, they went back to their seats and the function proceeded, but no one was able to separate them from the newly acquired treasures.

What is the Jaadui Pitaraa and what was going on?

It’s a colourful cube-like box with each side about a foot-long. Upon opening it, you will discover two levels of storage. The upper level has bright posters with stories and poems, story cards and flash cards, puzzles, a magic trick, and playbooks for children in Hindi and English for language and math. It also has handbooks for teachers on how to use all this rich material and other available resources to design and conduct educational activities which for children are play but are designed to achieve the curricular and developmental goals appropriate for their age.

Basically, the Pitaraa has a wide range of things that can be used for teaching and learning for the age-group 3 to 8, the ages that constitute the Foundational Stage of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) that has been drawn from it. The Jaadui Pitaraa is a real-life manifestation of three transformative ideas of the NEP and NCF-FS.

First, that children between the ages of 3 and 8 learn best through play. Which is the conclusion of past 4 decades of global research in fields ranging from neurosciences and child-psychology to language and education. To enable this play-based education, a wide range of teaching learning material (TLM) must be used—which is exciting and fun for children. The Pitaraa has a variety of TLM carefully put together to pique and hold the attention of children while pursuing specific learning goals.

Second, that this play-based education enabled by a wide range of TLM must support the learning and development of the child on all key parameters—cognitive including literacy and numeracy, socio-emotional-ethical, and physical. The TLM in the Pitaraa addresses all these domains.

Third, that the education of classes 1 and 2 kids (those between ages 6 and 8) must also move to this play-based approach, from the current didactic, text-book centric, chalk-and-talk approach. Such methods are not very useful for any age group, but are particularly ineffective for young children. The NEP's curricular and pedagogical restructuring of school education into a 5+3+3+4 system, which combines ages 3-8 in the Foundational Stage, addresses this. There is progression, but with deep continuity and commonality between ages 3 to 8. Around the age of 8, there is a distinct change in children's capacities because of brain development. The Pitaraa addresses the specific learning goals of this age group of 6-8 squarely with its play-based approach, including the development of foundational literacy and numeracy, which is currently a huge challenge for the country's education system.

The Jaadui Pitaraa and its contents are developed with a few other important considerations as well. Not only should the design, including the layout, pictures, illustrations and colour palette, be attractive to young children, but it must also be completely integrated with the content—the textual material, such as stories and poems. Most of the TLM should be locally collectable and developable; and for this, the Pitaraa has a specific help-book for teachers. Also, the cost must be reasonable. And the content must not be seen as a closed or prescriptive set, but rather as exemplar material that could spark the development of similar TLM across the country.

For our system to move to effective and high-quality education at the Foundational Stage, there are a few other important matters. The capacity of teachers and the support that they're provided are perhaps the most important of the lot, because we are expecting a transformation in their practice. And this cannot be done through a few days or weeks of perfunctory training, but only by high-quality professional development on a sustained basis. We will also need greater investment for these early years of childhood—not only in education, but also in nutrition and health.

The Jaadui Pitaraa is the right start to all these efforts. It is also a clear signal that the Foundational Stage—education and care of the age group of 3 to 8—has the highest priority in our education system. And to become effective, the approach to education at this stage must be transformed, because it does truly form the foundation not only for all subsequent education, but for the child's overall well-being in life.

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