

Towards Universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 states that 'The highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved' (Para 2.2, NEP 2020). No statement can more firmly establish the criticality of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in ensuring that students can benefit from the education they receive. In turn, this education prepares them to participate in society as contributing, productive members.

Criticality of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

FLN is critical on various counts. What may seem like the concern of schools for very young students, in the long term, has implications not only for these students' future well-being but also for the well-being of the nation.

Let us begin with the individual. FLN lays the basis for all further learning throughout life. For example, a basic understanding of numbers and mathematical operations, the use of standard algorithms for addition and subtraction, spatial understanding and data-handling are at the heart of the more complex understanding of accounting, statistics, trends, cause and effect relationships, etc. This understanding also enables children's engagement with the 'language' of subjects, like physics, chemistry, econometrics, etc. The ability to understand the relationship between symbols and sounds and interpret what a set of symbols conveys, construct meaning from listening and reading, think about what they have read, and to be able to communicate what is in their minds through writing, lays the foundation for critically thinking about what they read and for putting forth arguments using logical reasoning. It allows for critical interpretation of historical and contemporary sources, for persuasive writing and advocacy, for expressing observations and results of experimentation, and so on.

There is sufficient evidence that the time from birth to 8 years is a period of tremendous development. Therefore, students are expected to acquire FLN by class III. At the same time, this period is critical for making sense of the world around, and for socio-emotional, ethical, as well as aesthetic and cultural development. Therefore, the period from 3-8 years essentially determines, to a large extent, the learning trajectory of an individual as well as their adjustment in adult life. Thus, the emphasis on the acquisition of FLN in the NEP 2020 as an 'urgent and necessary prerequisite to learning' (title of Chapter 2 of the NEP 2020).

What happens if FLN is not acquired at a grade-appropriate age? Students become more and more hampered in the acquisition of competencies of higher grades. The gap between the capacities they should have and those that they actually have keeps growing larger. Frequently, they are addressed by labels that indicate the low expectations their schools and teachers have set for them. There is sufficient evidence that this situation lowers the motivation for learning. Students either cope with rote memorisation or drop out altogether. In this way, students are penalised for what is really a lapse in the school system.

On the other hand, individuals who have received appropriate support during the early years of their education are most likely to be well-adjusted, contributing adults who are productively employed. Research shows that there is a clear linkage between early childhood education and the markers of a healthy society (example, lower population growth rate, democratisation and human rights, political stability, crime rate reduction, poverty reduction, reduced inequality, health of citizens, diffusion of technology, enhanced life expectancy, and so on). The children of such individuals are more likely to survive their infancy and complete their schooling satisfactorily.

In addition to these relatively intangible benefits

are more pragmatic considerations, namely, returns on investment in education. These returns are calculated in terms of reduced public expenditure on social welfare programmes concomitant to well-being and more civic societies, along with revenues earned through taxes. Research across the world shows that the return on investment in early years education is high compared to other stages. For example, a report published in 2014 showed an estimated annual rate of return, adjusted for inflation, of between 7 percent and 18 percent for early childhood education. Another study, that followed students from 1985 to 2012 showed that every dollar invested in early childhood education resulted in a roughly seven dollars return on investment. Such studies related to early childhood education have not been carried out in India, but we can anticipate that a similar trend will be observed.

Current status of FLN in our country

The National Achievement Survey (NAS) is a large-scale assessment conducted across the country to determine the learning achievement of students of classes III, V, VIII and X studying in schools under different kinds of management across the country. It provides a clear view of the status of learning in the country. The most recent report of the NAS available is from 2021.

As a reference, a few examples of the learning outcomes assessed in NAS include:

- (i) In language – reads small texts with comprehension (identifies main ideas, details, sequence and draws conclusions) and reads printed scripts on the classroom walls (poems, posters, charts, etc)
- (ii) In mathematics – reads and writes numbers up to 999 using place value, constructs and uses the multiplication facts (up to 10) in daily life situations, reads the time correctly to the hour using a clock/watch, records data using tally marks, represents pictorially and draws conclusions, etc.

NAS 2021 shows that students' learning levels are low across classes III, V, VIII and X with an average learning level of 59 percent in class III, 49 percent in class V, 42 percent in class VIII and 36 percent in class X. Please note the drop in learning from lower grades to higher grades; this is similar to the results from the earlier NAS conducted in 2017. However, there is a decline in learning levels across all these classes for all subjects in 2021 compared to NAS 2017.

The mathematics score for class III was 57 percent while the language score was 62 percent. The score

in both language and mathematics in classes V, VIII and X was lower compared to class III.

How FLN goals will be achieved in the context of NEP 2020

Numerous efforts have been made to improve the status of FLN in the country. Education policies have stressed the importance of the early years, right from the policy of 1968 and emphasised by later policies and relevant documents.

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme started in 1975 was intended to provide education to children aged 2-6 years, among other services. *Anganwadi* centres across the country were set up under this scheme.

Under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in the 1990s, efforts were made to converge primary education with ICDS by relocating the *anganwadi* centres within the primary school premises as far as possible.

In 2013, the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy was released, recommending 'inclusive, equitable and contextualised opportunities for the optimal development and active learning capacities of all children below 6 years of age.' In 2014, the Ministry of Women and Child Development brought out a National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework for children aged 3-6 years, followed by a Preschool Curriculum for three years of preschool education along with *Guidelines for Preschool Education* developed by NCERT in 2019.

The NEP 2020 attempts to take these efforts forward by making some fundamental changes in the structure of schooling itself. It attempts to situate the attainment of universal FLN in the larger context of the ecosystem within which the education system is located. To this end, it restructures the school stages, creating the Foundational Stage comprising three years of preschool (before class I) and classes I and II. This change is curricular and pedagogical and is not to be implemented in terms of bringing all centres providing education for students aged 3-6 years and those providing education for the first two years of the primary stage together. Its importance is that the curriculum for all students aged 3-6 years will have continuity and a similar approach.

Next, it sets forth a vision for the inclusion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. For those students who have not had the benefit of education prior to class I, it attempts

to ensure, through a school-readiness module, attainment of necessary competencies. A module for this purpose, called *Vidya Pravesh* has been developed by NCERT, and various states have either contextualised or developed their own module.

To enable the transition to the new structure, the NEP 2020 also speaks of *balvatikas* or preparatory classes to be set up within primary schools where possible, wherein qualified teachers can support student learning till such time that the capacities of *anganwadi* personnel are developed.

In 2021, post the release of the NEP 2020, the Central Government launched the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat Mission under the aegis of the centrally-sponsored scheme of *Samagra Shiksha*. The focus of this mission is on students aged 3 to 9 years, which includes preschool to class III. At the same time, students who are in classes IV and V, who have not attained FLN, are to be provided individual teacher guidance and support, peer support and age-appropriate and supplementary graded learning materials to acquire the necessary competencies. The goals and objectives of the mission are for all schools so that universal acquisition of FLN skills can be achieved by 2026-27.

Translation of NEP 2020 into classrooms

Policy is translated into classrooms through the syllabus and textbooks. These syllabi and textbooks are ideally rooted in the context of schools but guided by the National Curriculum Framework, so there is uniformity in the broader goals of learning.

In October 2022, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) was released, and in August 2023, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) was released. The NCF-SE is for all of school education, including NCF-FS that focuses on the Foundational Stage.

The NCF-FS is intended to support the development of curricula and syllabi across the country while ensuring alignment with the

intent and spirit of NEP 2020. It also aims to outline the key transitions that are critical for the attainment of the goals of NEP 2020. This is enabled through, first, articulating the curricular, pedagogical and assessment approach for the Foundational Stage. Next, it provides specific details at the level of everyday school processes and classroom practices, with clear illustrations across a variety of contexts. Most importantly, NCF-FS states learning standards, which include the broad curricular goals and competencies that are to be achieved by the end of the Foundational Stage. It also suggests illustrative learning outcomes that will lead to the attainment of the desired competencies by the end of the Foundational Stage. These learning outcomes are not linked to any specific year of schooling, in keeping with the fact that each student learns at a different pace.

The NCF-FS goes beyond the attainment of FLN goals, with more comprehensive goals beyond cognitive development, and language and literacy development. Thus, while both NIPUN Bharat and NCF take a competency-based approach, NCF-FS goes beyond NIPUN Bharat competencies. It, thus, enables the holistic development that is essential for learning across stages.

Conclusion

The assumption of the foundational capacities of FLN as the basis for all learning aligns with the emphasis NEP 2020 and, consequently, NCF gives to 'learning to learn'. This emphasis categorically signals the idea that everything cannot be and should not be taught. But what must be learnt is the capacity to learn whatever is important or of interest to students during school or later life. Learning must be in progression – if any link is missed, it takes a long time, or even forever, to make up the loss. Thus, the onus on schools and teachers to focus on quality education across domains in the Foundational Stage.

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I have seen that teachers seem to spend more time with students who learn fast and grasp things better, whereas those who actually require additional time are given very little of it. I believe that if all teachers consider this question, *what should I do to help these children come up to the class level so that they can start learning too?* they can focus on developing teaching-learning strategies for these children and will definitely have success in the classroom.

Satvir Singh Chauhan, Organising Time in A Mixed-Ability Classroom, p. 42