

Reading the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage

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The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) was released in October 2022 by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). This, along with the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, August 2023), are two of the four curriculum framework documents that have been developed to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. The NCF-FS was developed to realise the vision of education as imagined and articulated by NEP 2020, which laid emphasis on the crucial years of early childhood, ages 3 to 8 years.

This article introduces NCF-FS to the reader by highlighting some of the key aspects and design principles adopted by the drafting committee. A significant contribution of this curriculum framework is the clear articulation of the *Learning Standards* in the different domains of child development. This article explores the need and relevance of Learning Standards and then describes the structure of the document with the hope that it would act as a guide to the readers of NCF-FS.

Key highlights of NCF-FS 2022

The NCF-FS 2022 is a 360-page document that envisions an integrated approach to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children between ages 3-8 years. Its holistic curriculum covers all the relevant domains of development – physical, socio-emotional and ethical, language and linguistic, cognitive, aesthetic and cultural, including positive learning habits. These domains of development have been identified based on both ancient Indian knowledge of *panchakoshas*,ⁱ and the more modern scientific understanding of child development.

As mentioned before, this curriculum framework defines specific Learning Standards, which are articulated as *Curricular Goals, Competencies, and Learning Outcomes*. We will explore these in more detail in this article.

While Learning Standards define what the

desirable educational achievements are, the document gives specific and detailed guidelines on how these are to be achieved. It provides in detail pedagogical approaches, ways to organise the learning environment, principles for selection of content, and appropriate ways to assess learning at this stage. It further outlines ways in which school time can be organised through illustrative weekly schedules and daily timetables.

The NCF-FS clearly lays down the approach for developing literacy in at least two languages in the Foundational Stage. It recommends a balanced literacy approach, giving equal emphasis on word recognition and accuracy in writing words (lower-order skills) and language comprehension and expression (higher-order skills). The four-block modelⁱⁱ for literacy pedagogy that addresses oral language development, word recognition, reading, and writing, all simultaneously, is the means to achieve foundational literacy.

Foundational numeracy, along with literacy, forms Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), and has been given special emphasis in NEP 2020. Again, the pedagogy recommended for developing numeracy is again balanced with equal emphasis on conceptual understanding and skills practice. The four blocks for mathematics instructionⁱⁱⁱ includes oral maths talk, skills teaching, skills practice, and math games to encourage problem-solving.

Design principles adopted in drafting NCF-FS

The authors of NCF-FS have consciously adopted a set of principles while writing the document. It is important for a reader of the document to understand the rationale behind these principles and the design choices made by the authors.

Guide for practitioners

The NCF-FS is explicitly directed towards practitioners, namely, school teachers. Curriculum frameworks tend to be written in idealistic and abstract terms that make it difficult for practitioners to relate them to their everyday practice. So, the language used in NCF-FS document is consciously less technical and academic.

The document does not remain at the level of abstract principles and approaches. It gives specific illustrations and vignettes from real classrooms and teachers' voices to make these principles appear more concrete in the hope that these illustrations make the guidelines and recommendations more relatable and accessible to practitioners. While this makes it a long document to read, it is more relevant and effective.

Specificity

To be relevant to practitioners, a document of this nature needs to be specific, and not lose touch with reality. In educational circles, regarding educational thought, there is often confusion between what is prescriptive and what is specific. The NCF-FS holds that being specific is useful for teachers and helps guide them in their practice, but it does not necessarily prescribe specific practices. Teachers have always had, and should always have, the autonomy to adopt and adapt practices to their own contexts.

Pragmatism

Creating a curriculum framework is an exercise of hope and idealism. It aims at improving school education. However, if the aims are to be feasible and possible, the suggestions and recommendations should not only be specific but also emerge from current realities and practicalities. In a way, curriculum frameworks aim for social change through change in school education. Changes suggested by curriculum

frameworks, to be implementable, should be small gradual steps, rather than giant leaps.

Establishing Learning Standards

One of the core features of NCF-FS is its articulation of Learning Standards. Simply put, these Learning Standards respond specifically to the question: *What to teach?* To be useful and implementable, it is not enough to state the broad aims and purposes of school education or even the specific aims of each school subject. The broad aims must be further refined into specific goals and competencies which are clear statements of educational achievements. There is a clear flow-down of expected learning achievement, where each set gets into finer detail but has a clear connection to the previous level. (Figure 1)

Aims of school education

Education, in its fundamental essence, is the achievement of knowledge and capacities that are considered valuable. The purpose of education is thus normative, depending on the norms that society envisages. In the Indian context, this normative direction is our Constitution. For NCF-FS, this vision of education comes from what is articulated in NEP 2020.

Aims, Curricular Goals, Competencies, and Learning Outcomes, together form the Learning Standards. The Learning Standards is a clear and specific flow-down of curricular logic from broad aims to specific learning outcomes. Going by the principles articulated earlier, these Learning

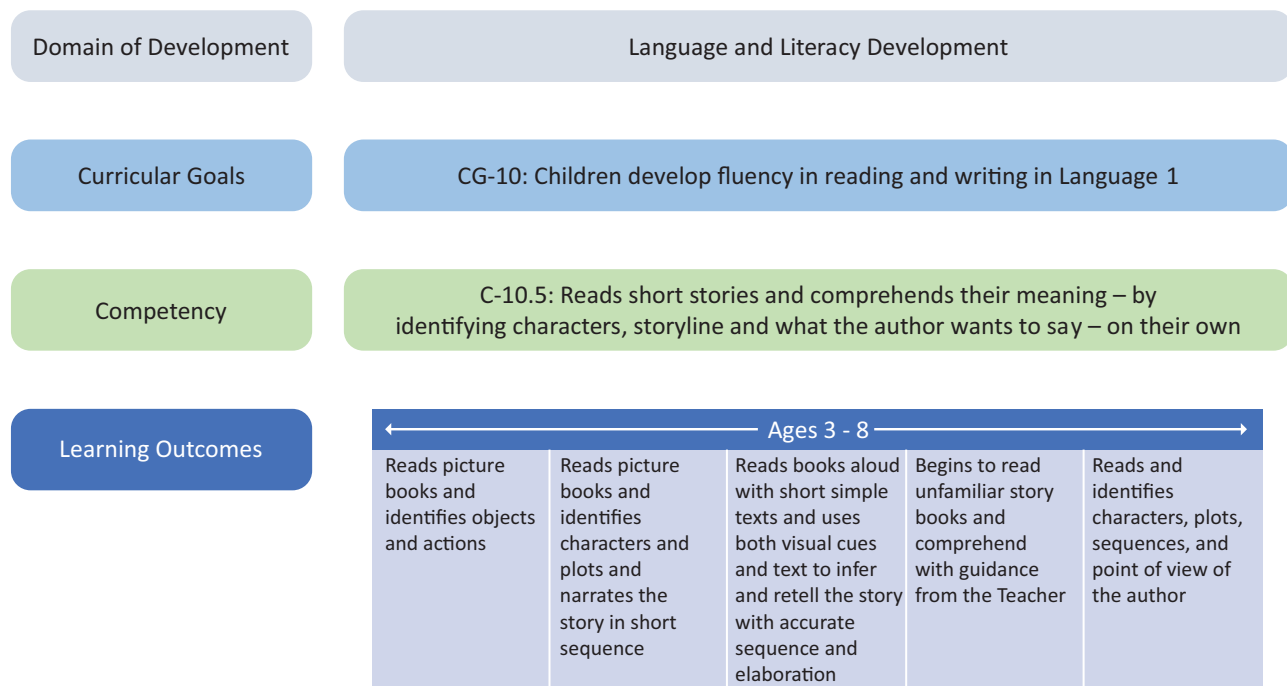


Figure 1. A flow-down of the Learning Standards.

Standards are the backbone of NCF-FS and give clear and precise direction for all practitioners to improve school education in our country. This is a seminal contribution of this NCF, and it is a clear departure for the better from previous curriculum frameworks.

Curricular Goals

The Curricular Goals of NCF-FS are derived from the broad aims of education as envisaged by NEP 2020, the domains of development as imagined in *panchakoshas* as well as modern child development theories, and the focus is on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN). The NCF-FS recommends thirteen curricular goals across the five domains of development, including the goal of developing positive learning habits.

Competencies

For each of the 13 Curricular Goals, 68 more specific Competencies have been defined. These Competencies are observable and assessable statements of educational achievements. They are defined in NCF-FS and allow for a clear tracking of educational progress that is visible to all stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, and the community at large.

Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes are 'interim markers' of learning achievement towards the attainment of Competencies. These Learning Outcomes also indicate the learning trajectory for achieving the particular competency at the end of the Foundational Stage. Students spend five years of schooling in the Foundational Stage. While competencies define what is to be achieved by the end of each stage, textbook developers and teachers need to have clearer ideas on what should

be the appropriate learning achievements each year so that these competencies are achieved by the end of the stage.

It must be noted that while the Curricular Goals and Competencies are fairly universal and stable, Learning Outcomes can be specific to the context in which a school operates. Thus, Learning Outcomes defined in NCF-FS are more illustrative in nature and school systems and schools can develop their own set of Learning Outcomes to realise the Competencies, based on their context.

A guide to reading the document

For a Foundational Stage teacher, this document is not just a curriculum framework but can act as a handbook.

- It is important to understand the idea of Learning Standards. A thorough reading of Chapter 2 would not only enable that but will also inform the teacher of the specific goals and competencies towards which their efforts need to be directed.
- Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are directly relevant to the practice of Foundational Stage teachers. It would be helpful for teachers to refer to the specified annexures to get a concrete understanding of the principles outlined in these chapters.
- For responding to children with developmental delays and disabilities, reading Chapter 8 is critical.
- For Educational Functionaries and Administrators, Chapters 1, 2, and 10 are essential reading.

The NCF-FS is a comprehensive document that provides clear, specific, and pragmatic guidelines for all aspects of schooling in the Foundational Stage. Teachers and other practitioners would greatly benefit from a close reading of this document.

Endnotes

- i The Upanishadic theory of the five sheaths of a human being.
- ii National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage. 4.5.1.5 The Four-Block Approach for Literacy Instruction. p. 116
- iii National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage. 4.5.2.3 Blocks of Teaching for Mathematics Instruction. p. 121



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Structure of NCF-FS Document

NCF-FS is 360 pages long and is divided into ten chapters and four annexures.

CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: Preamble and Introduction outlines the development of ECCE in India, the vision of NEP 2020, the current understanding of how children learn at the Foundational Stage and the context of schooling in India at the Foundational Stage. This sets the context and vision for the curriculum framework. (p. 13)

Chapter 2: Aims, Curricular Goals, Competencies, and Learning Outcomes is a critical chapter of NCF-FS and it sets the Learning Standards for all the five domains of development in the Foundational Stage. While the Curricular Goals and Competencies are the complete set, a few illustrative Learning Outcomes are outlined in this chapter. (p. 49)

A complete set of grade-level Learning Outcomes are given in Annexure 1.

Chapter 3: Approach to Language Education and Literacy is the chapter in which the overall approach to language education is outlined. India is richly endowed with linguistic diversity and this chapter recognises that strength and outlines when and how different languages should be introduced in the school. (p. 71)

Chapter 4: Pedagogy gives guidelines for specific pedagogical approaches that are appropriate for this stage of schooling. Play-based methods of engaging young children, strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy, and the role of positive relationships between teachers and children are elaborated in this chapter. (p. 81)

Chapter 5: Choosing, Organising, and Contextualising Content for Teaching engages with the issue of selecting and using appropriate content for achieving the Learning Standards. While pre-primary grades (ages 3-5) are largely based on concrete materials and playful experiences, textbooks can start playing a role in grades 1 and 2 (ages 6-8). Organising the physical learning environment, the classroom, is critical for this stage and the document outlines specific suggestions on how to organise the classroom. (p. 135)

Chapter 6: Assessments for Furthering Learning Objectives elaborates the approaches to assessments at the Foundational Stage. In the early years assessments are to be based on more qualitative observations of the child, assessments can take a variety of forms like portfolios and worksheets. The need for a Holistic Progress Card that covers all domains of development is emphasised in this chapter. (p. 169)

Chapter 7: Organising Time provides guidelines for organising time – annually, weekly, and daily. Illustrative timetables are provided for reference. (p. 85)

Chapter 8: Additional Critical Areas addresses two core concerns relevant to this stage. Early identification and addressing of developmental delays and disabilities (including learning disabilities) is crucial to provide inclusive education for all. Child safety and security is also paramount. These concerns are addressed in this chapter. (p. 191)

Chapter 9: Linkages to the Preparatory Stage outlines the progression from the Foundational Stage to the Preparatory Stage. School subjects as curricular areas emerge in the Preparatory Stage and the document gives suggestions on how to transition from domains of development into these school subjects. Approaches to content, pedagogy, and assessment would have both continuity and changes and these are elaborated. (p. 203)

Chapter 10: Creating a Supportive Eco-System engages with the necessary conditions in the overall ecosystem of schooling and talks about the preparation of teachers, school environments, the role of academic functionaries, and parents. A section on technology looks at what is the role of Information and Communication Technologies and takes a balanced view of considering both the possibilities and precautions for usage. (p. 207)

ANNEXURES

Annexure 1 defines illustrative learning outcomes for all the competencies. (p. 225)

Annexure 2 contains illustrations for different practices that includes teaching, content selection, assessments, and organising classrooms. (p. 275)

Annexure 3 maps the competencies with those in NIPUN Bharat. (p. 325)

Annexure 4 contains references to research on ECCE from India and across the world. (p. 335)

Contributed by Ramchandar Krishnamurthy.



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