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Building Foundations Well: The challenge for primary education

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The draft New Education Policy gets it right in emphasising the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education and the need to urgently work on establishing foundational literacy and numeracy at the primary stage, where there is currently a learning crisis.

Since 2005, year on year, the the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) have consistently shown that children’s reading and arithmetic levels are worryingly low. Fifteen years ago, about half of all children in Std V in rural India were unable to read a Std II level text. This number has remained virtually unchanged till 2018. If anything, there were signs of a further decline for a few years, soon after 2010. It is obvious that these findings have serious implications not only for how children are coping with school today but also for what they will be able to acquire when they are in upper primary grades and in secondary school.

Children do learn as they proceed to higher grades, but these learning trajectories remain relatively flat over time. For instance, even in Std VIII in 2018, close to 25% of the children were struggling with being able to read simple text (ASER 2018). The ASER data shows that in some cases learning trajectories of current cohorts lie below those of previous cohorts. What this means is that each additional year of schooling may be adding less and less “value” for successive groups of children.

Other student achievement surveys and assessment data collected by government bodies as well as by scholars show similar trends like that in the ASER data, even though different tools and methods have been used. High enrollment coupled with low learning is not only a characteristic of the Indian education system. In fact, in the last 10 years, as more and more data especially on basic learning has become available globally and researchers have started looking beyond schooling, similar evidence has emerged for many other countries of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This crisis in primary education was considered important enough for the World Bank to devote the 2018 World Development Report to understanding the nature and dimensions of the learning problem.

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Given this background, the draft National Education Policy 2019 (dNEP) must be congratulated for boldly accepting and addressing “this crisis head on and immediately” (p55). The draft goes on to emphatically state that

[A]ttaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children must become an immediate national mission. Students, along with their schools, teachers, parents and communities, must be urgently supported and encouraged in every way possible to help carry out this all-important target and mission, which indeed forms the basis of all future learning (p56).

The document stresses that attaining these goals must become “an indispensable and non-negotiable part of the curriculum” (p60).

Recognizing, accepting and understanding a problem are essential initial steps for laying down a path towards the solution. To date, no educational policy document has made such a strong or urgent case for why foundations of learning need immediate attention. Although there are many things in the Indian education system that need to be fixed -- redone, revised and re-imagined -- the dNEP document is right in pointing out that building foundational skills must be a core activity, at least in primary school. “Our highest priority must be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school and beyond by 2025” (p64). Bluntly and frankly, the document states that “the rest of the policy will be largely irrelevant for such a large portion of our students if this most basic learning (reading, writing and arithmetic at foundational level) is not achieved first” (p64).

Looking at available evidence and also based on our accumulated experience, 25 years of working with children, families and schools in urban slums and village communities, has convinced us that three key strategies need utmost priority if we are to achieve the dNEP’s objective – “by 2025, every student in Grade 5 and beyond has achieved foundational literacy and numeracy”.

Building the base in early years

First, strong foundations need to be built in early years so well that children can “leap forward”. The widespread phenomena of “falling behind” that we see today happens because the right things are not done at the right time.

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At least for the cohort of children who start school now, our aim should be to help them travel smoothly on a reasonably paced but rising pathway of learning so that by the time this group reaches the end of elementary school, they are well prepared to deal with further education and for life.

The dNEP strongly endorses the notion that the early years (age 3 to 8) should be considered a “foundational stage” and must be a continuum. Children in this age should “have access to a flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, discovery-based education” (p47). The document outlines major legislative, institutional, curricular and pedagogical changes that will be needed for a complete overhaul of early childhood and early grades’ goals, framework and practices.

It is fair to say that the educational establishment in India, such as the government bodies at central, state and district levels that have so far guided schools (like the National Council of Education Research and Training, the State Councils of Education Research and Training or the District Institutes of Education and Training) have little or no experience with the pre-school age group. Pre-primary classes are often part of primary schools in the private sector and much of the student intake happens in lower or upper kindergarten. However, research studies show that most activities in these institutions in the early age group are “school-like” and do not provide the flexible, play-based and developmentally appropriate activities that are suited for supporting the development of young minds. Despite several years of exposure of pre-school education, such children are still not “ready” for Std 1. (See the 2017 [India Early Childhood Education Impact Study](#) by Ambedkar University and ASER Centre)

At the same time, the Department of Women and Child Welfare of the Government of India that runs the ICDS system, is typically overwhelmed by responsibilities in health, immunisation and nutrition of pregnant and new mothers and their infant and young children. Overall, it is well accepted that in anganwadis, early childhood stimulation or development has not received the high priority that it needs.

Bringing these two ministries together, all the way from Delhi to the state capital to districts and till the last village will be a huge and challenging task but one that is certainly worth undertaking. The draft policy document states that

[I]t has been estimated that the development of a strong ECCE [Early Childhood Care and Education] programme is among the very best investments that India can make ...In summary, it is recognized that investment in ECCE gives the best chance for children to grow up into good, moral, thoughtful, creative, empathetic and productive human beings (p46).

The draft policy document outlines several recommendations for action. Overall, significant support and strengthening of delivery of early childhood education will be needed keeping in mind local context, needs and opportunities. For example, in the past year, in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, the state government has already taken the step of creating pre-primary classes in their primary schools (in all government primary schools in Punjab and in about 3000 schools in Himachal). The learnings from their experiences could be useful for other states. In both states, the movement towards private schools happens from age 3 or 4 onwards. Parents find private schools attractive for many reasons, one of which is the availability of pre-primary classes. Parents who have educational aspirations for their children but do not have the money to send their children to private preschools tend to enrol their children in Std I in government schools as early as possible (since there is no pre-primary in government). In fact, the comparison of age-grade distribution shows that till recently children in Std I in government schools tended to be significantly younger than children in private schools. Starting formal school too early and having to deal with academic expectations of Std I can also impede proper growth. Starting pre-primary classes in government schools and facilitating proper transition from anganwadis to pre-primary classes to Std I should help in exposing children to developmentally appropriate activities at the right time and right age and hence pave an effective pathway for strong foundational learning.

Foundational skills in primary grades

Second, for those children who did not have the benefit of a good start in their early years, a strong and durable mechanism for “catch up” is needed before they finish primary school. For this, “more of the same” or “business as usual” will not work. The table below provides a concrete example of the challenge that teachers face in classrooms on a daily basis.

ASER 2018: % Children in primary school who can read at different levels						
All India rural districts:						
Representative sample of all children from household survey						
Example	Cannot recognize letters yet	Can recognize letters but cannot read words	Can read words but cannot read sentences	Can read simple text at Std I level but not higher	Can at least read Std II level text (& maybe higher)	Total
Std III	12.1	22.6	20.8	17.3	27.2	100
Std IV	7.6	15.9	16.6	19.3	40.7	100
Std V	5.9	11.7	13	19.1	50.3	100

Note: The ASER survey is one of the largest household surveys in India done by a non-government body. A representative sample of children in all rural districts are reached. Close to 600,000 children are covered in each year’s ASER. Children are tested one-on-one using the basic ASER reading tool in main language of instruction in the state.

Look at the row that summarizes the situation for children in the Std V class. For India as a whole, about 50% of all children are at least able to read at Std II level (it is quite likely that some of them are reading at a higher level too). But what about the other 50%? That half is spread across several reading levels starting from not being to even recognize letters to just about coping with simple sentences. This wide dispersion is one of the biggest challenges of teaching and learning in primary school. For the teacher the daily dilemma is who to teach? And what to teach them? For years, our school system has remained staunchly anchored to teaching the curriculum, usually guided by the grade level textbooks. The typical teacher focusses on children at the “top of the class”, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. Teachers cannot be blamed. In fact, even the RTE Act says teachers “must complete entire curriculum within specified time” (RTE Act 2009, 24.c)

Interestingly, the dNEP lays out many causes for the learning crisis including the lack of school readiness, “too little curricular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy”, methods of teaching, role of language, difficulties in teacher allocation and poor health and nutrition (p56-57). But it does not directly address the “negative consequences of overambitious curricula” (Pritchett and Beatty 2012) or the usual practice of teaching to the top of the class” (Banerjee and Duflo 2012). In a later section, there is however reference to “the current content is severely overloaded” and “overcrowded” (p77) and that “the rush in classrooms to finish and rush through all the mandated curricular material via rote memorization continues to prevent opportunities for critical thinking and discovery based, discussion based and analysis based learning – and thus true understanding – from taking place” (p77).

Given the size, depth and magnitude of the “catch up” that is required, we will need a persistent and high priority effort for at least five years or more.

The dNEP states that “school and classroom curriculum and schedules for Grades 1-5 will be redesigned to focus on foundational literacy and numeracy”. Practical suggestions are made for dedicated hours per day, weeks per year, special events, materials and activities for time and focus for reading, writing and arithmetic. These suggestions have major implications for how teaching-learning time and teacher effort is re-allocated during the school day and the school year.

Even before the draft policy document was prepared, many states have started such initiatives with varying degrees of impact, durability and success. (See for example, state government initiatives like “Padho Punjab, Padhao Punjab” in Punjab, “Odu Karnataka” in Karnataka, “Graded Learning Programme” in Uttar Pradesh, “Mission Gunvatta” in Bihar, “Mission Buniyaad” in Delhi). The real challenge on the ground is how to balance the imperatives of a one-time “catch up” effort with the routine, regular running of school schedules which tend to be ruled by the syllabus. Embedding the “catch up” into the institutional structure of the school system in an ongoing basis or into the annual school calendar has so far been difficult. Given the size, depth and magnitude of the “catch up” that is required, we will need a persistent and high priority effort for at least five years or more. The alignment of key elements of the school system such as teacher training, teaching-learning material, ongoing teacher support, mentoring-monitoring, assessment, and course correction towards achieving stated goals is critical. Perhaps this alignment for foundational learning will now be possible given the overarching direction of the new policy.

Engaging parents and mobilising communities

Third, looking back at India's achievement of almost universal enrollment, credit must be given to the government and to parents and community members for ensuring that every child is in school. For reaching the goal of every child learning well, a similar societal mobilisation is needed. The draft document goes beyond the usual prescriptions of “community involvement” or “parent participation” to outlining modes and mechanisms to encourage large-scale community and volunteer involvement through programmes like the National Tutors Programme and Remedial Instructional Aides Programme (p60). Interestingly, in our own work in urban slums and rural communities, there have been ongoing vigorous efforts to involve local youth and to engage parents in recognising and understanding the learning needs of their children. A series of external evaluations (randomised control trials by JPAL) has found the role of volunteers to be significant. If done in a meaningful way, connecting young people to school children who need help can be a powerful tool for collective action, social cohesion, collaborative learning and nation building.

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Two of the draft policy recommendations are worth highlighting: The National Tutors Programme (best students in each school who can help younger students) and Remedial Instructional Aides Programme (local instructors especially women) who can work with students who need additional help. The policy also suggests that instructional aides can be encouraged to get further certification and be given credit for their service. The idea of “education for education” (shiksha ke badale shiksha) is a powerful one; if you give time to help younger children in your village, you “earn” credit towards your own continuing education. In our own work in communities in the last decade, we have experimented with different versions of “education for education” both for volunteers in anganwadis and also in primary schools. Getting official recognition for effort and credit towards further study can be an effective combination for productive community service and continuing education.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we must remember that a policy lays out broad goals and suggests a course of action. It indicates direction and frameworks for creating the roadmap towards goals. The nuts and bolts of planning, operationalising, course correction and review will take place in the years after the policy starts getting implemented. Policies must be aspirational; if the situation is satisfactory then a new policy is not needed. The devil is in the details; it is the job of implementers to translate the policy into action. The balancing act between aiming for desired goals and building realistic pathways is not easy; constantly aligning practice with policy and learning from each incremental step is a must.

For young children and for those of primary school age, the dNEP lays out a set of goals that are essential for the future development of the country. Whether it is for equity or for growth, it is urgent to ensure that the creative and productive potential of our young population is realised. It is up to planners and practitioners, parents and people to see how hard we are all willing to work together to help all children reach their full capability.

(The views expressed in this article are those of the author.)

References:

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