

Significance Of Foundational Literacy And Numeracy At The Childhood Stage Through The Lense Of Nep 2020

PAVAN KUMAR (Research Scholar)

DR. ANKUR SHARMA, Assistant Professor (Supervisor)
Institute of Education and Research, Faculty of Humanities
Mangalayatan University, Aligarh

Abstract

Acknowledging the significance of early education, the National Education Policy 2020 declares that “Our top priority should be to attain universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in primary education and beyond by 2025. The remainder of the policy will be mostly insignificant for a significant number of our students if this essential learning (reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is not accomplished first. The Mission's vision is to establish a supportive environment that guarantees universal attainment of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Consequently, guaranteeing high-quality foundational literacy and numeracy access for all children has emerged as a critical National Mission, requiring a comprehensive five-point action plan that encompasses curriculum reform, innovative teaching methods, reconfiguring the teacher education framework, reevaluating assessment techniques, and offering administrative assistance—coupled with resource and program enhancement, technological solutions, and the engagement of diverse stakeholders, which must be executed with prompt urgency. Moreover, to accomplish this significant objective, a platform is needed where people from various sectors of society, including stakeholders, parents, educators, school leaders, and policymakers, can share their viewpoints and experiences to develop more thorough and extensive strategies for attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy.

Key terms: Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), Importance of FLN and NEP, 2020 and its suggestion for FLN.

Introduction:

In the history of our planet, India as an independent country holds a distinctive place characterized by its rich and intricate cultural diversity, along with a dedication to democratic principles for the benefit of everyone. To achieve this, India has recognized the

significance and magnitude of the mission to educate every single child. It demands a certain approach. Since the constitution was adopted in 1950, education has played a central role in India's developmental priorities. India is attempting to address the needs of rapidly evolving, knowledge-driven societies, considering its varied population, culture, and traditions, through successive policies and five-year plans featuring clearly defined and forward-looking educational reforms. Throughout its extensive journey since gaining independence, the trajectory of educational planning and development in India has experienced significant milestones – Based on the suggestions of the Education Commission (1964–1966), the inaugural Education Policy in India was launched in 1968, followed by the announcement of the National Policy of Education in 1986, which was later accompanied by its Programme of Action (POA 1992) that outlined the blueprint for its execution. From 1986 to 2020 nearly 34 years elapsed.

In the meantime, globalization and the demand of the knowledge economy highlight the importance of establishing new national development goals. Consequently, a committee was established in June 2017, chaired by Dr. Kasturirangan. This committee, taking into account the recommendations from different sectors of society, formulated a draft policy and released it on May 31, 2019. After reviewing additional recommendations, the National Education Policy 2020 was unveiled in July 2020.

India's revised education policy has envisioned a nation-centric education framework that actively aids in transforming our country sustainably into a fair and dynamic knowledge society by delivering high-quality education to everyone, as India aims to position itself as the third-largest economy by 2030-2032, a transition likely to be led not by natural resources, but by knowledge resources. To achieve this objective, a knowledge society founded on a robust and effective education system is essential. At this moment, the clear question is "Are we truly prepared to embrace the challenge?" The National Education Policy drafts (2019) state, "A significant number of students presently in elementary school, possibly exceeding 5 crores, have not achieved foundational literacy and numeracy, meaning the capacity to read and understand simple text and perform basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals." It is simple to conclude that, "we are facing a serious learning crisis regarding these fundamental skills" (NEP Draft 2019). Surprisingly, this remark about the NEP 2019 draft is not simply an unexpected revelation but rather a collective result of multiple government and non-government survey reports conducted on this matter. Based on the previous discussion, it is relevant to state that, upon reflection on the recent past, significant steps were taken to promote the concept of "Education for all."

The main initiative for the universalization of primary education is the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, initiated in 2001. This centrally sponsored program is executed in collaboration with State/UT governments and focuses on ensuring that all children are in school and remain there. The national commitment to attain universal elementary education received additional impetus with the enactment of the 86th Amendment Act, 2002, which added Article 21-A to the Constitution of India, ensuring free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years as a Fundamental Right, according to laws determined by the state. (EFA – advancing quality with equity in India 2014). Following two decades of significant measures focused on educational development specifically aimed at the grassroots level, it's undeniable that access and equity have substantially improved in India – which boasts the largest primary education system globally with over 200 million children. However, we must also acknowledge that a serious learning crisis continues to exist. To justify the above, we found Dr. K. Kasturirangan's perspective, the chairman of the committee for Draft NEP 2019, to be the most important. He states, “In the years following independence, we have primarily focused on access and equity, regrettably neglecting the importance of education quality.” In conclusion, it can be stated that while the quantitative aspect of the constitutional commitment to expanding universal access to education has nearly been fulfilled, the qualitative improvement still remains a dream for the country. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of achieving that qualitative aspect.

The designer of the policy have recognized that if the fundamental learning essentials of reading, writing, and arithmetic are not met, the remainder of the policy will become insignificant for a large segment of India's population. Therefore, the new policy document, NEP 2020, prioritizes universal access to quality education for everyone, focusing on attaining foundational literacy and numeracy in primary education by 2025. **Review of related studies**

Various government and non-government surveys clearly highlight the learning crisis concerning the foundational literacy and numeracy of rural children, a few of which may be presented in this section to provide an in-depth view of these issues.

1. The effective delivery of education in rural regions of the developing world has been a concern for policymakers, activists, and researchers for decades. (Psacharopoulos, Patrinos 2004 and Sachs, McArthur, 2005). India is likewise affected and has faced this challenge since its independence and despite recent advancements, a continual learning crisis persists. We are even struggling with fundamental literacy and numeracy, which hinder

our progress towards becoming an educated nation (Chavan, 2018).

2. In 2005, Pratham, an Indian NGO dedicated to education, chose to investigate what children were genuinely learning under the initiative of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER); Pratham organized volunteer teams to assess over 1000 children in randomly selected villages across every district – 700,000 children in total – and produced a report card. Nearly 35% of children in the seven-to-fourteen age group were unable to read a paragraph (first grade level) and almost 60% of children could not read a simple story (second grade level). Only 30% were capable of performing second-grade mathematics (basic division).
3. This crisis has also been reflected by Dr. Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo in their well-known book 'Poor Economics' (2011), where they stated, "In India, 95 percent of children now have a school within a half mile or so. . . . getting children into school is a very important first step: This is where learning starts. But it isn't very useful if they learn little or nothing once they're there."
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4. ASER has witnessed transformations in India's educational landscape for over a decade. Year after year, they have sought to reflect and uncover the true educational conditions in India. As quoted by Banerjee and Duflo (2011), "These days in India, in an annual ritual in January, ASER results are released. . . and very little changes."
5. In 2010-2011, ASER published its 5th annual report (Annual Status Education Report – Rural, 2010) regarding education's status in India. This report indicated that there was a rise in the enrollment of five-year-olds in schools, from 54. 9% in 2009 to 62. 9% in 2010, though it also noted that more than half (53. 4%) of all surveyed children still attending school by fifth grade could not read, write, or solve arithmetic problems typically expected of second graders after five years of schooling.
6. The 2014-15 survey marked the tenth year of the survey, partnering with around 250 DIETS and other NGOs for its execution. The findings from ASER 2014 reveal that India is nearing universal enrollment for children aged 6-14, with 96% of children enrolled in school; however, the overall state of basic reading remains extremely disappointing in India. In 2014, only one-fourth of children in Std. III could read a Std. II level text fluently. The national (rural) statistics for basic arithmetic have shown minimal changes over recent years; in 2012, 26. 3% of Std. III children managed a two-digit subtraction, while this figure slightly decreased to 25. 3% in 2014. The percentage of Std. II

children unable to recognize numbers up to 9 has risen over time, from 11. 3% in 2009 to 19. 5% in 2014.

7. The most recent annual report, the Annual States of Education Report (Rural), was released for the year 2018-2019 in January 2019. The overall situation remains largely unchanged from previous years, showing that 27. 2% of all children in Std. III can read at the Std. II level. The corresponding percentage of children capable of at least performing subtraction stands at 28. 1%. Therefore, it is quite evident that the percentages are disappointingly low. Madhav Chavan, President and Board of Directors member of Pratham Education Foundation (2018), describes the total situation as follows: “This means that not only are we not creating a sufficiently literate population, but that most of our population is functionally illiterate.”

The ASERs are not merely the single report card that serves as a wake-up call; there have been many others as well – assessments conducted by NCERT, namely NAS, Educational initiatives, and numerous smaller scale studies demonstrate that although children are attending school, they are not learning. Therefore, taking all of these facts into account, it is quite evident that there is an urgent requirement to adapt flexibly to the current circumstances in order to improve the learning paths of those primary learners by guaranteeing quality foundational literacy and numeracy to achieve the mission and vision of NEP '20. This leads the researcher to undertake the present study. Consequently, the study aims to provide a thorough and concise overview of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy along with the underlying causes of the obstacles in achieving universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, as well as the action plan to overcome these challenges as outlined in the NEP '20 policy and Draft NEP '19 policy. Thus, the problem can be articulated as: “Universal Foundational Literacy – Numeracy and Access to Quality Education for All.”

Foundational literacy and numeracy:

From the moment of birth, a child experiences various development phases, acquiring different life experiences to become a fully functioning individual. Encountering the experiences of reading, writing, and numeracy is one of those phases and can serve as a crucial building block for a child's life. These early experiences not only mark the initial step towards lifelong learning but also provide means for a child to explore, connect, and understand the world. Therefore, these fundamental skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, which are essential for functioning in today's knowledge-based society, can be viewed as foundational literacy and numeracy.

Foundational literacy and numeracy represent the primary and essential stage in educating a child — a critical and necessary prerequisite for learning. Significant policy documents from the past have consistently recognized the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy with great seriousness. A strong foundation in literacy and numeracy supports a child's natural growth in education and channels her interests appropriately to achieve educational objectives. This principle is echoed in the current National Education Policy 2020, which states, “The ability to read and write and to perform basic operations with numbers is a necessary foundation and indispensable prerequisite for all future school and lifelong learning.”

In relation to the aforementioned discussion, when we examine the term foundational literacy and numeracy, it is a comprehensive concept yet a composite one. Foundational literacy and numeracy consist of two interconnected but distinct concepts: foundational literacy and foundational numeracy.

These two terms can be explained as follows: Foundational literacy can be understood as the abilities and skills associated with listening and speaking, reading and writing, allowing for the interpretation of thoughts with comprehension. Likewise, foundational numeracy pertains to the development of numerical understanding, mathematical reasoning, and the application of basic operations on numbers for problem-solving.

Foundational literacy and numeracy as portrayed in NEP 2020:

In continuation of the earlier discussion and based on the findings from various studies, it has been observed in our present educational framework that numerous students display a flat learning curve year after year, as they are falling behind in essential literacy and numeracy skills; this issue has emerged as a significant factor contributing to student dropouts from school. As the NEP draft 2019 emphasizes, “so many capable students have found themselves in this unfortunate black hole, unable to emerge. For many students, this has become a major reason for not attending school.” The NEP 2020 reiterates that the concern of addressing foundational literacy and numeracy is extremely crucial, as this sentiment has been echoed repeatedly. The policy indicates that achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy is the state's top priority, and this is reflected in the NEP draft 2019 as – “Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children must become an immediate national mission.”

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the remarkable impact that an educational initiative has on society and vice versa, The National Education Policy 2020 introduces “A framework for the transformation and reinvigoration

of the education system in order to respond to the requirements of fast changing knowledge based societies while taking into account the diversity of the Indian people, their tradition culture and languages” (NEP Draft 2019). In this process of transformation, human capital is key, so the top priority is to ensure “universal access to an education of high quality and breadth,” with universal foundational literacy and numeracy at its core. As discussed throughout this study, these high-quality educational opportunities genuinely shape the future of Indian children. Therefore, ensuring quality foundational literacy and numeracy access for every child has become an urgent National Mission, necessitating a five-fold plan of action that includes curriculum revamping, pedagogical innovation, restructuring the teacher education system, reassessing assessment practices, and providing administrative support—alongside resource and program development, technological intervention, and the involvement of various stakeholders, which must be approached with a swift urgency. Furthermore, to achieve this monumental task, a platform is required where individuals from different sectors of society, such as stakeholders, parents, teachers, headmasters, and policy-makers, can exchange their perspectives and experiences to formulate more in-depth and comprehensive strategies for achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy.

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