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Review of the Draft National Policy on Education 2019 Chapter – 1 and Chapter 2

Abstract

This article highlights the important recommendations laid by the draft National Education Policy, 2019 on Early Childhood Care and Education and Foundational literacy and foundational numeracy.

Early Childhood Care and Education and Foundational literacy and foundational numeracy

The Basics of what is Foundational literacy and foundational numeracy

The draft of the National Policy on Education 2019 elaborates its vision for education through the preamble that envisions education as (P25) The historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted at the UN General Assembly in 1948, declared that "everyone has the right to education". Article 26 in the Declaration stated that "education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages" and "elementary education shall be compulsory", and that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'. The idea that education must result in the 'full development of the human personality' continued to be reflected in influential reports such as that entitled Preamble 25 'Learning: The Treasure Within', which the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century chaired by Jacques Delors, submitted to UNESCO in 1996.' The report quoted to bolster the policy also argued that education throughout life was based on four pillars: i) Learning to know, ii) Learning to do iii) Learning to live together and iv) Learning to be.

It adds (P25) *Such an articulation of a broad view of education encompassing the holistic development of students with special emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual, in all its richness and complexity, has grown increasingly popular in recent years, and many recent reports from UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, and the Brookings Institution have highlighted the broad consensus that has developed.*

But, in the light of the vision detailed above, when one looks at the overall policy, in all the sections, the policy seems to defend all its propositions from an entirely '21st century economic development' perspective or an 'employability' perspective *only*. While I would not deny their importance, it is suggested that the policy should widen its own understanding of what the aims of education should be and its incoherence with the policy's vision. Unlike the vision, in many sections, the policy chooses to define 'development' as only economic in nature, then it chooses a certain stance that it should re-look at from a human development and welfare perspective elaborated in its vision. Further, to reflect on how the policy is written, in many places, it uses banal platitudes for stating larger educational goals, development and social and economic welfare of people, but it fails to discuss or

describe the meaning of terms, phrases and statements used. However good the intention, this brings a vague interpretation of each section by the reader and fails to communicate a meaning that all the readers will be able to associate to.

With regard to the first chapter, it is highly appreciable that after years of research and feedback from academicians and practitioners, the government has emphasized on the importance of ECCE and foundational literacy and numeracy. While it elaborates why ECCE should be included and 'What' should be included, it also differentiates 'quality' pre-school education from that of the private school education. It mentions "*Meanwhile, the private and other pre schools have largely functioned as downward extensions of primary school. Though providing better infrastructure and learning supplies for children, the consist primarily of formal teaching and rote memorization, with high Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTRs) and limited developmentally appropriate play-based and activity*-based *learning; they too generally contain teacher untrained in early childhood education. They generally are very limited on the health aspects, and do not usually cater to younger children in the age of 0-4 years."* Thus rather than a mere inclusion, it highlights and suggests the importance of age appropriate pedagogic practices to be used with such an age group. This is a big policy decision and will impact many children positively.

Another important aspect of this section is the policy's ability in being able to differentiate between the early 'cognitive simulations' that children require (0-3 years) before introducing them to an educational framework (3-8 years). This important emphasis will avoid articulation of ECCE as a 'reduced' version of the curriculum or an implication that the formal school instruction should merely be 'preponed' and started with 3 year old children. Lastly, a major achievement in this section is the suggestion for concrete policy decisions like expanding the Anganwadis and co-locating them with the existing primary schools along with stand-alone pre-schools and most importantly extension of the RTE Act to include early childhood education. Thus, the inclusion of this chapter is a thoughtful inclusion in the policy.

As for the second chapter, it can again be seen positively that the policy lays great emphasis on the teaching of foundational literacy and foundational numeracy. But while one should appreciate the research and intention behind such effort, it is suggested that the policy must spend time in elaborating on what it really means by 'foundational literacy' and 'foundational numeracy'. This section tries to throw some light on the same. The policy introduces this by stating :

(P55) 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. However, various governmental as well as non-governmental surveys clearly indicate that, at the current time, we are in a severe learning crisis with respect to these most basic skills: a large proportion of students currently in elementary school - perhaps over 5 crore in number - have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read and comprehend basic text and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals.

In the above passage, the policy should elaborate on "what exactly will 'basic' be" and while these are extremely important, is only foundational literacy and numeracy sufficient for lifelong learning? If a policy limits the definition of foundational literacy and numeracy to this, then it will be an extremely reductionist understanding of what these are for a nation that already regards these skills as 'basic' which are literally translated as 'lower' in order, 'easy to teach' and can be taught to children only if

- Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) was less and classrooms were less crowded,
- if children were regular to schools,

- if children had access to ECCE, if there was curricular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy,
- If teacher's capacity in teaching them was built
- and if the community actively participated in it

All of the statements really contradict the existing policy documents and fail to see the problem in the implementation of those policy decisions and curriculum frameworks. It instead overlays a new understanding stating that this never existed. The National Curriculum Framework 2005- syllabus, not only described these foundational skills, but also elaborated an age-wise division of skills that could be taught to children. In fact the detailing in the mathematics curriculum is still a benchmark in redefining the pedagogy of mathematics and epistemological understanding of the subject. Thus, it is important for the policy to also review the existing documents in light of their execution and people's understanding of it. The policy further states that :

(P56) Schooling in the early years also lays too little curricular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy and, in general, on the reading, writing, and speaking of languages and on mathematical ideas and thinking. Indeed, the curriculum in early grades moves very quickly towards rote learning and more mechanical academic skills, while not giving foundational material its proper due. The principle must be that: if students are given a solid foundation in reading, writing, speaking, counting, arithmetic, mathematical and logical thinking, problem-solving, and in being creative, then all other future lifelong learning will become that much easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more individualised; all curriculum and pedagogy in early grade school must be designed with this principle in mind.

What it describes here is an 'observed practice' in the school. At the policy level, there were established provisions through years of rigor that went in revising the national curriculums, textbooks, teacher education programs and assessments. Despite the national frameworks, the states had *'chosen'* to design their own frameworks, textbooks, and teacher education programs that looked at the pedagogy of foundational learning in a traditional* (*single term used for various pedagogic practices that do not align with the constructivist pedagogy suggested in the revision of curriculum in NCF 2005, can be unpacked).* One such example can be taken from many state textbooks that actively choose to base their assumptions about foundational literacy entirely on acquisition of phonics. In such a case, the policy must reflect on the aspects of 'implementation' of the existing policies along with overriding it with newer policy decisions. For such gaps in implementation, it should also clearly define the terms, phrases and implications for the readers of the policy so that there is a uniformity in what the policy implicates. Similar examples can be seen in chapter 4, Curriculum and Pedagogy in Schools, where it posits :

(P74) Studies in cognitive science demonstrate that children prior to the age of 8 learn best through play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based multilevel flexible styles of learning and interaction, whereas around the age of 8 children naturally begin to adapt to a more prescripted style of learning, indicating that teaching-learning processes in Grade 3 may also begin to transition to a more formal style of learning, e.g. by incorporating some basic textbooks, while still maintaining a strong play- and discovery-based approach.

The term ' *prescripted style of learning'* opens up the pandora's box of what this term may mean to the readers of this policy. Would it mean that a discovery-based approach can only be used to cater to 'early age groups' and the rest of the education can largely be 'prescriptive'? Are '*discovery-based multilevel flexible styles of learning and interaction'* not formal styles of learning? Can textbooks not be a source of / lead to *discovery-based learning styles?* Further, even when the policy tries to meet the gap between what is suggested in policy and what is implicated, it states :

(P 57) Because of the depth and severity of the problem, teachers cannot be asked to go at this alone - a large scale nationwide effort and dedication will truly be required, which will involve the community as well. Students themselves can be a first major resource in this regard. Studies around the world show one-on-one peer tutoring to be extremely effective for learning - not just for the learner, but also for the tutor. An old Indian saying incisively states that "Knowledge is the only quantity that increases for oneself when one gives it away to others"; indeed, one-on-one peer tutoring by senior students was one of the key successful hallmarks of the ancient gurukula system. Prestigious peer-tutoring positions will be instituted, not just for foundational literacy and numeracy, but across all school subjects, in order to improve learning outcomes for all.

While it describes an implicated nationwide 'effort and dedication', it should elaborate in concrete terms 'what will these efforts be?'. The above statement *"Knowledge is the only quantity that increases for oneself when one gives it away to others"* also reflects a certain epistemological stance that a national policy is adopting, which I strongly think is against the vision of the policy and the existing documents that understand knowledge as *construction* and not as a *body or a quantity*. Examples of such phrases, will bring ambiguity for implementers of the policy. The entire assumption about holding '*remedial classes'* for foundational literacy and numeracy raises many questions for its understanding amongst the readers. Some of these are :

- Why is a remediation required?
- Is there no role of teachers not knowing the pedagogy of these skills? Why are they not talked about ?
- Why are civil society organizations repeatedly falling back on curriculum frameworks and still trying to tell the teachers the 'correct' (described in position papers and NCF) ways to teach?
- Will a mass remedial help if the remedials are also carried out with the same assumptions about the nature of the subject, assumptions about the learner and the curriculum ?

For the clarity of implications, these are the questions that the policy must seek to answer. It furthers these assumptions in the community's support in such remediation by stating : (P58)*"If every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly; this mission will be highly encouraged and supported."* It needs an elaboration of what are these 'skills' that the community will teach to its wards. In fancy ways, it describes the increased focus on school foundational literacy and numeracy through designated times and events and fails to elaborate ' what is to be done in that time' assuming that the schools and teachers understand such subjective interpretations. If one has to summarize the emphasis on this travesty of foundational literacy and numeracy, it would be:

"Do this, do that, do it a lot. Involve him, involve her and do it a lot. Train them, train all, prepare the schools and involve technology, and do it all – except 'what is to be done'.