

perspectives

A Quarterly Viewletter

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Focus : Early Childhood Education and Development

Foundation Building: A National Imperative for Education

The opportunity for translating policy into practice

GUEST VIEW

At this moment, India is at a unique crossroad as far as early childhood education is concerned. There are some immediate tasks that have to be undertaken as schools and families recover from the last two years of pandemic induced disruptions and missed opportunities. But at the same time, there are promising possibilities for medium and long-term progress that need to be charted and prepared for.

Schools opened in most states in India by April 2022. While older children were able to "return" to school, the youngest cohorts - Grade 1 and 2, were very different from their counterparts in entering the same grades in previous years. Thanks to the pandemic, these two cohorts of children did not have the opportunity to go to pre-school (Anganwadi, nursery or kindergarten) of any kind. Without much preparation or readiness, the current Grade 1 and 2 children and teachers are having to deal with the expectations and requirements of being in the early grades in school. Clearly, "business as usual" cannot work for these young

children, at least not for this year or the next.

Given this context, schools and school systems need to be thinking hard right now about at least two issues: First, in school, how Grade 1 and 2 teachers can be supported for appropriate classroom transactions and guided to do relevant teaching-learning activities? Second, one of the positive learnings to come out of the pandemic is the active role

The National Education Policy document clearly states that the foundational stage has to be given the highest national priority so that a solid base of learning is in place by the time the child has spent two-three years in formal school.

that parents and families played in the learning of their children when schools were closed. So, the immediate task is to think about how families and communities can be enabled to continue to engage in their

children's learning on an on-going basis?

As we look beyond the immediate needs and take a medium and long-term view, we can turn to the new policy. India's new National Education Policy was launched in July 2020 (NEP 2020). Under the guidance of the eminent scientist, Dr Kasturirangan, the drafting committee spent several long years listening to and participating in widely held discussions with diverse groups and types of people around the country.

The final policy document is about sixty pages long. However, one of the most important statements in the document is on page 8. It says:

Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term (including that every student will attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3). The highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal



Rukmini Banerji
CEO, Pratham Education Foundation

foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school 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. (Section 2.2 p 8).

Although it is well known that the early childhood years are of critical importance for the development and growth of children, it is for the first time in an official document that the age group 3 to 8 is being seen as a continuum that is part of the entire education

system. As the text above indicates, the policy document clearly states that this foundational stage has to be given the highest national priority so that a solid base of learning is in place by the time the child has spent two-three years in formal school.

There are several key implications of this new national priority that need to be understood if the policy has to be translated into practice and if the process is to lead to the envisaged goals.

One, at the national, state and district levels there has to be convergence and integration of efforts across departments and ministries to strengthen the experiences of children in the age group 3 to 8. Currently, the responsibility of children below the age of 6 belongs to the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare. The education

department's responsibility is from Grade 1 onwards (or age six and above). To enable a strong foundation building effort to happen, children must have developmentally appropriate activities and supportive environments, whether they are in an Anganwadi, in a private school or in a primary based preschool class. Further for the spirit of the continuum to stay intact, the transition from preschool to formal school must be smooth.

Two, to build strong foundations, it is not sufficient to work only on children's literacy and numeracy capabilities. There is a breadth of skills – including physical, social, cognitive and emotional that need to be built. Methods and materials that allow exposure to children to these domains in a meaningful and effective way need to be built into the daily activities across the entire age continuum.

Three, family members especially mothers must be active members of the child's learning journey. Parental awareness about the importance of the foundational stage, the continuum or progression of development and the breadth of skills is critical. Changing mindsets and practices at home is as important as in school. Hands-on activities and guidance in an ongoing manner will help families support children as they grow and thrive.

The goals outlined by the new National Education Policy 2020 are achievable. To translate the policy into practice, all parts of our society – citizens, corporates and governments have to work together. If we are able to do that, in five years' time, India will be well positioned to significantly change the trajectory for development for the remainder of this century.

Views expressed are personal

MY VIEW

A Commitment For Change



Seema Arora

CEO, CII Foundation and
Deputy Director General, CII

“Good quality early childhood education contributes significantly to improved cognitive development in children. The CII Foundation has adopted a multi-stakeholder approach engaging with government, NGOs, corporates and communities to strengthen ECE to bridge the gap between privileged and underprivileged children before they start formal schooling.”

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



Sustainable Development Goal 4

Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education For All

Goal 4 calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Providing quality education for all is fundamental to creating a peaceful and prosperous world. Education gives people the knowledge and skills they need to stay healthy, get jobs and foster tolerance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened a crisis in education, with severe disruptions in education systems worldwide. School closures have had worrisome consequences for children's learning and well-being, particularly for girls and those who are disadvantaged, including children with disabilities, rural dwellers and ethnic minorities. An estimated 147 million children missed more than half of their in-person instruction over the past two years. As a result, this generation of children could lose a combined total of \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings (in current value).

Goal 4 Targets

- 4.1. By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes

- 4.2. By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
- 4.3. By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- 4.4. By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- 4.5. By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- 4.6. By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
- 4.7. By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development

and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

- 4.A Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
- 4.B By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
- 4.C By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states

Source : <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

Promoting Quality Early Childhood Education

Voices from the Ground

The CII Foundation has been working towards strengthening early childhood education and development through a multi-stakeholder programme delivered through the Anganwadi Centres in Jammu and West Bengal.

“The Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) were dark, grungy, and cluttered. They lacked maintenance, and poor-quality food was being served. This was a major deterrent, keeping parents from sending their children to the AWC. I was not aware of preschool education activities but after the skill training, I have ideas of involving children in fun-filled learning activities at the centre rather than just providing nutrition. At present, not only children but community members and parents also visit the centre and seem to be satisfied.”

Bashira

An Anganwadi Worker at the Kawa Anganwadi Centre in Ramban, Jammu

“I have been working as an Anganwadi Worker (AWW) for more than 20 years. Never have I ever felt as confident and competent as I do now after attending the training facilitated by CII Foundation. We have learnt a lot through the training provided to us - using poems and Teaching/Learning Materials (TLM) to engage the children, work on their cognitive development, etc.”

Rajdulari

An Anganwadi Worker in Ramban, Jammu



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