

SHAKY BUILDING BLOCKS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Many children in elementary classrooms across India cannot read and write proficiently, as demonstrated on an annual basis by the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). This affects other school-based learning, as well as functioning in societies and economies that prize literacy.

It was heartening, therefore, to see a chapter devoted to “Foundational Literacy and Numeracy” in the draft National Education Policy, 2019. The focus it places on the early years is welcome, and the continuity it recommends between the pre-primary and primary years is necessary. Likewise, its emphasis on mother tongue-based education and oral language development are critical. However, the analysis presented on why children fail to learn to read and write largely points to factors surrounding the teaching and learning process — the health and nutritional status of children, high student-teacher ratios, and so on. While each of these factors is undoubtedly important, they do not address with sufficient clarity curricular, pedagogical and teacher education-related issues that plague the teaching and learning of early literacy in many Indian classrooms.

Most classrooms across India view the task of foundational literacy as teaching children to master the script, and being able to read simple words and passages with comprehension. Higher order meaning making, critical thinking, reading and responding to literature, and writing are typically reserved for later years of schooling. This draft reinforces such restrictive and outdated ideas about the goals of a foundational literacy programme.

Research evidence from around the globe demonstrates unequivocally that even very young children are capable of using early forms of reading, writing and drawing to express themselves and to communicate; they are also capable of inferential meaning-making, critical thinking, and so on. This entire body of scholarship, referred to as “emergent literacy”, has been ignored in the draft. This has powerful consequences for the recommendations that follow, which propose largely oral activities for the pre-primary grades, reading hours for Grades 1-3, with an additional hour for writing starting only in Grades 4 and 5. It contradicts evidence suggesting that young children be taught listening, speaking, reading and writing simultaneously and not sequentially.

Another concern is that the recommendations are based on generic theories of early childhood education, such as multiple age groups learning together in flexible, play- and activity-based ways. They don't draw upon ideas specific to the teaching and learning of early literacy. Early literacy requires a “balance” between helping children to acquire the script, and engaging them with higher order meaning making. It also requires knowledge of a variety of pedagogical approaches, such as reading aloud to children, guiding children in their efforts to read and write, encouraging independent exploration, helping them learn about different genres of texts, and so on. Further, it needs a balance of materials — moving beyond textbooks and workbooks to high quality children's literature, material created by the children themselves, and the like.

Teachers need to know how to differentiate instruction for learners at different levels and how to provide specific help to students who are struggling. This also requires sufficient time — an average of two-three hours per day, as per the recommendations of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). While it may be beyond the scope of a policy document to detail specific curricular and pedagogical approaches, it must provide sufficient direction for a national curriculum framework to pick up from — in this case, it should signal the need for a balanced and comprehensive approach to foundational literacy and knowledgeable teachers for

its implementation. Earlier documents addressing this issue (for example, MHRD's Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat, 2014, and Ambedkar University's position paper on Early Language and Literacy in India, 2016) have been far more specific in recommending a comprehensive approach with expanded time, and a balance of goals, methods and materials.

This brings me to a third concern, which is a lack of discussion about what it takes to prepare teachers to successfully teach foundational literacy in a multilingual country. Instead, the document recommends recruiting volunteers and community members to support the acquisition of early literacy (even remedial instruction!) in the primary grades, albeit under the guidance of teachers. This lends credence to a dangerous and erroneous idea that any literate person can teach literacy, and undercuts sophisticated understandings related to children's development and literacy learning that teachers ideally bring to their jobs. Volunteers can be used, but cannot be a primary mechanism that a national policy relies upon to deliver foundational literacy to students.

In focusing on the limitations of the non-academic nature of anganwadi experiences on the one hand, and the inappropriate curricular and pedagogic practices followed by many private pre-schools on the other, the authors of the draft appear to have not engaged with the advances made by scholars, practitioners and policy-makers in the field of early literacy.

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