

NEP 2019's 'excellent' early education reforms face significant challenges

Massive financial and technical resources are needed to create cadre of trained, accredited pre-school teachers -- a tough task given the humungous number of posts already lying vacant

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The Draft National Education Policy (NEP) 2019's proposal for strengthening early childhood care and education (ECCE) by making it an integral part of school education and bringing it under the purview of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is an excellent idea, say most experts, but the road

to its success will have to be paved with difficult administrative reforms and sizeable investment in a cadre of trained teachers.

The Draft NEP 2019 recognises that there is a severe learning crisis in India, a major part of which is occurring before children even enter Grade-1, as they come with low levels of school readiness due to inappropriate pre-school education or its complete absence. It calls for ensuring every child in the age range of 3-6 years has access to free, safe, high-quality, and developmentally-appropriate care and education by 2025. The document has proposed a new curricular and pedagogical structure called the "5+3+3+4 design", which will replace the 10+2 system, to meet this objective. It also calls for the extension of the Right to Education Act, 2009, to cover children from ages three to 18, instead of from six to 14 years.

A committee led by Chairman K Kasturirangan on May 31 submitted the Draft NEP 2019 to HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank'. The report has been put online for suggestions until June 30.

First building blocks of learning

Under the 5+3+3+4 structure, children in the 3-8 age group would begin learning from the "Foundational Stage", which consists of three years of pre-primary and Grades 1 and 2. The key change is that the committee has viewed the period, from up to three years of pre-school (ages 3-6) to the end of Grade-2 (age 8), as a "single pedagogical unit" called the foundational stage with a flexible curriculum that will allow children to learn at their own pace and master the basics. If implemented, it would be a fundamental departure from the 10+2 system, wherein school education begins with Grade-1.

"It is the foundational stage that is critical," says Madhav Chavan, co-founder and CEO of education NGO Pratham. He describes it as "an excellent idea", but cautions that it would take a lot of work, commitment and finances to make it happen.

The foundational stage would consist of "flexible, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based learning". At present, even private and other pre-schools, which are anyway accessible by very few children, consist primarily of formal teaching and rote memorisation, which experts say are inappropriate for this age group.

"The proposed 5+3+3+4 design takes into cognisance advances and discoveries in cognitive science, as well as attempts to provide developmentally and age-appropriate curricular and pedagogical intervention," says Dr Renu Singh, Executive Director at Young Lives Research to Policy Centre.

The committee has outlined clear policy initiatives, which entail substantial investment in physical and human infrastructure and coordination across ministries.

MHRD to the fore

At present, most early childhood education is imparted in Anganwadis and private pre-schools, which lack uniform standards and practices. Further, the committee found that most Anganwadis have remained "relatively light on the educational aspects of ECCE". To remedy this, one of the committee's policy initiatives calls for placing all aspects of early childhood education under the purview of the MHRD.

"Given the situation in Anganwadis with regard to education, I take this policy recommendation to be a very positive step, since MHRD will undoubtedly bring in the required rigour to ensure that quality curricular and pedagogical frameworks for play-based learning are put into place," says Singh.

Anganwadis are part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, which has been renamed as Anganwadi Services, and come under the purview of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) at present. Meanwhile, health services in the ICDS scheme lie with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MHFW). "Administratively, getting ICDS from the MWCD to MHRD at the Centre and getting all education under a centralised State Education Commission or Rajya Shiksha Aayog could be difficult," says Chavan.

The Draft NEP 2019 says that a detailed plan for the integration of early childhood education with the school education system would be developed in consultation with the MWCD and MHFW. This plan would be finalised by the end of 2019 by a special task force, which would be jointly constituted by the MWCD, MHFW, and MHRD.

The concerned ministries and the joint task force would also decide which ministry would be in charge of running the Anganwadis. Whatever be the decision, the committee stresses that the "responsibility for planning

and implementation of all ECCE curriculum and pedagogy in Anganwadis and all pre-schools lie with the MHRD".

"ECCE as a subject as per business rules is with MWCD and not with HRD. The largest public sponsored programme for ECCE, the ICDS, is also under the MWCD. With the recommendation that the Education Department should take greater control of ECCE, the concurrence of the MWCD will be required," explains Venita Kaul, Professor Emerita Education and Executive Chairperson at Ambedkar University Delhi's Center for Early Childhood Education and Development.

The challenges ahead

The committee envisages that the new curricular and pedagogical framework for early childhood education, to be developed by the NCERT, would be delivered through a four-pronged approach: Strengthening and expansion of the Anganwadi system to include a robust education component; co-locating Angawadis with primary schools; co-locating pre-schools with primary schools where possible; and building stand-alone pre-schools. Further, all these institutions would employ workers or teachers "specially trained in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECCE".

Dr Renu Singh says both financial and technical resources would be required to ensure that a cadre of trained pre-school teachers is created in the coming years. She adds that this would not only require collaboration across ministries and departments, but also a sizeable investment in early years. It would also include accrediting pre-school teachers. "Without this, we will not be able to realise the potential of 'Foundational Learning' as envisaged in the Draft NEP 2019," she says.

Ensuring availability of teachers will be no mean feat. In July last year, the government had informed the Lok Sabha that over one million posts of teachers at the elementary and secondary level were lying vacant across the country. Out of a total of 5,103,539 sanctioned posts for teachers at the elementary level, 900,316 posts were lying vacant, according to data compiled till March 31, 2017.

In particular, the committee calls for Anganwadi workers trained in techniques of cognitive stimulation for infants and play-based and multilevel education for 3-6-year-olds to be stationed across the country, so that there is at least one such worker at every Anganwadi. The challenge is that this would require an additional Anganwadi worker in every Anganwadi since ICDS has six services, of which pre-school education is only one. It caters to children below the age of 3 years, too, and to pregnant and lactating mothers. Experts ask how these services will be delivered. This would require significant financial allocation, say educationists. Consider that as on June 1, 2018, there were a total of 1.4 million sanctioned Anganwadi centres, out of which 1.363 million were operational. Further, in December last year, the government had informed the Lok Sabha that 200,000 posts for Anganwadi workers and helpers were lying vacant in the country and that while 86.15 per cent of the country's Anganwadi centres were running from concrete buildings, the remaining 13.85 per cent were operating from make-shift ones.

To achieve the ECCE goals, the committee also calls for existing Anganwadi Centres to be "heavily built up" and for additional centres to be built to ensure that "every mother and child has free and easy access" to them.

Kaul says there is credible research evidence from a longitudinal research carried out recently by her team at Ambedkar university and the ASER Centre, titled 'India Early Childhood Education Impact Study 2017', to support the recommendation of carving out the 'Formative Stage'. The study clearly indicated that the assumption guiding makers of school curriculum — that children move in a rigid and linear progression annually in the pre-school to school system — could often be wrong and could result in cumulative learning gaps for children. She had presented this evidence to the Kasturirangan Committee.

"We see clear evidence of a learning crisis in primary schools today," Kaul says. "So, we proposed this reform for a progressive but flexible foundational curriculum that would allow most children to learn at their own pace with less pressure and more interest and acquire a sound foundation by the age of eight."