

PERILS OF PREMATURELY IMPARTED LITERACY

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

Overhaul has a nice connotation. The smooth first run of one's childhood bicycle after it got overhauled is a lasting memory. When people say that a system has become so bad that it needs an overhaul, they actually believe that such a thing is possible, that someone can do it. In popular imagination, an overhaul also carries an association with radical improvement. Machines improve quite radically after an overhaul, but social systems like education behave more like living beings as they carry legacies and tendencies rooted in the wider social ethos. These tendencies need to be studied and recognised before radical remedies are administered for improvement.

The [National Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#) offers to revise and revamp the system of education. Such a promise carries great public appeal because a lot of people feel quite fed up with the system. Any doubt about the need for an overhaul in education today is likely to be stigmatised as a sign of conservatism. Disruptors and out-of-the-box solutions have been in the air for some time.

The Hindu Explains | [What has the National Education Policy 2020 proposed?](#)

The [National Knowledge Commission \(NKC-2008\)](#) had set the stage for this kind of popular radicalism. We now have a fuller script. At times, it falls back on older, tired ideas, such as the three-language formula. It evinces approval for the recent trajectory of ideas like quantifiable basis for seeking credit ratings and rankings, outcome-based assessment, technology-driven governance, and so on. They are treated as pointers to a bolder agenda. Little room is available for doubting, let alone debating, the impact such measures have had so far.

One significant shift NEP proposes is in the re-organisation of elementary education. As of now, it comprises eight years of schooling starting with Grade 1 at age six as Article 45 of the Constitution envisaged. The Right to Education (RTE) act promulgated a decade ago treats these eight years as a composite stage, consisting of five years of primary and three years of upper-primary education. NEP offers a surgical procedure which will graft the first two primary grades on to three years of preschool education. On the face of it, this idea looks great as it starts a child's educational journey from age three instead of six.

The plan also implies a historic break from the system as envisaged in the Kothari report (1964-1966) which recommended the present 10+2 system. NEP proposes a new structure. Instead of 10+2, we will now have a 5+3+4 system, in which the first five years include three years of preschool education (starting at age three), followed by Grades 1 and 2 of the primary school. Although a wide spectrum of goals is mentioned for the preschool years, the overarching focus is on making children 'school-ready' in the context of reading, writing and arithmetic. The term used in NEP is 'foundational literacy and numeracy'. A separate section is devoted to it, underlining its importance as a 'prerequisite to learning'. It sounds great, but let us stop to study its implications.

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Visit a nursery in any part of the country and you will inevitably find three- to four-year olds reciting the English alphabet and numbers. The idea that learning begins with the alphabet and numbers is very popular indeed. Many people believe that there is nothing wrong in introducing a child of three to reading and writing. If you express some doubt about such an idea, some

people might agree to delay this plan by a year or so, but that is the limit. The reasoning behind this belief is that if reading and writing are the two fundamental skills a child will need to do well at school, what is the harm in cultivating these skills from the earliest possible age?

Indeed, the faith in early acquisition of literacy and numeracy extends to the feeling that any delay on this front will harm the child's development. Nothing could be more contrary to truth although we must acknowledge that the matter is still regarded by many as a subject of debate. The key issue in the debate is our concept of reading itself. There is a sharp division among perspectives on what constitutes reading; more specifically: how is reading learnt?

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The older perspective is that reading starts with familiarity with the alphabet. According to this view, the child must learn to recognise individual letters and their sounds first, and then move towards recognising simple words by recognising the letters that comprise it. This view has prevailed in human history for so long that scientific research on how our eyes and mind process a written text has made no decisive difference in countries like ours. This body of research has demonstrated that a child's search for meaning is a far sounder basis for learning to read than mechanical practices like letter recognition and associating letters with their names and sound values. Prematurely acquired literacy can be harmful in that it creates a habit, difficult to remedy later, of ignoring the message.

In daily life, we see plenty of evidence of such a habit. Reading without relating to the text or to its author is far more common than using one's ability to read in order to make sense of a text. Despite education, many literates develop no interest in reading. An introduction to the alphabet and being drilled for letter recognition at a very young age is a major source of reading without deriving any meaning or showing any interest.

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Similar harm is done to writing when it is acquired before one needs it. Writing is basically a means of conveying one's ideas to someone else. It becomes a meaningful activity when an intended audience begins to matter for the small child. If no need is felt for an audience, acquisition of writing becomes merely the attainment of a mechanical skill.

What applies to reading and writing is equally true of prematurely acquired numeracy. Mathematics offers to the child a means to make sense of the world, but the desire to relate to different objects arises with the widening of experience and engagement. Prolonged drills to habituate the child to chant numbers aloud, and then to learn how to manipulate them damages the bridge that connects numbers with real things or matters of interest and curiosity. By starting too early, the need for such a bridge is precluded. This has long-term consequences for learning mathematics and for perceiving it as an attractive subject.

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A culture of speed pervades all spheres of school life. Middle-class parents set the norm for this culture by pushing their infants to consume the various products sold in the pedagogy market. Digital equipment is the latest addition to the educational toys that have long been favoured over cottage toys which quietly represent the wider world and serve as a symbolic bridge to what all lies outside the home.

The school's long shadow now extends to the home, and parents sigh with relief when they secure their children's admission to a nursery in the third year of their life, if not earlier.

Changing family norms and social conditions make the transfer of the young child from home to a nursery inevitable. Although nurseries routinely use the rhetoric of play-way, their programmes are mostly a downward extension of the school. This social reality makes early childhood education in its present form a mixed blessing. By promoting foundational literacy and numeracy as a key educational target of early schooling, we are likely to stress further an already embattled childhood.

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