A sound foundation

The draft National Policy on Education has an important reform on the first stage of education

The draft National Policy on Education is in the public domain for comments till June 30, 2019. A commendable reform suggested in the policy is creating a foundational stage as the first stage of school education. This reform proposes to bring the three years of pre-primary and the two years of Grades 1 and 2 into a composite unit with “a single curricular and pedagogical phase of play and discovery-based learning” between the ages of 3 and 8 years.

This proposal suggests a significant departure from the present structure of school education, in which the pre-school stage of 3-6 years is delinked from Grades 1 and 2 and even kept out of the ambit of the Right To Education Act. It is currently under the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

‘Best investment’

The proposal’s implications need to be understood from two perspectives. One, this implies that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for 3- to 6-year-olds will become an integral part of the organised school structure, and thus become the responsibility of the education department. It should also make ECCE a justiciable right of all 3- to 6-year-olds. The committee considers ECCE to be “among the very best investments” that India could make in education since neuroscience evidence indicates that “over 85% of a child’s cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6”.

Secondly, the curriculum for Grades 1 and 2 will be developed in upward continuity with the pre-school curriculum, in terms of both content and pedagogy. If implemented well, this can have a positive impact on children’s learning as it would ensure a play-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum for children up to not just 6 but 8 years, which would give them a stronger foundation. This upward extension will further smoothen the transition from pre-school to the primary stage and consolidate the foundation for future learning.

However, two significant concerns identified from collaborative research by Ambedkar University and ASER Centre need to be addressed in implementation. The pre-school curriculum was observed to be primarily a downward extension of the primary curriculum. Children were engaged for most of the time in copying or rote learning of alphabet and numbers, a practice which is developmentally inappropriate and can be counterproductive from the perspective of a sound foundation.

Play-based learning

Children at this stage require a curriculum which emphasises play-based learning opportunities that promote engagement with play materials, picture books, building blocks, puzzles, etc. and include teacher-led storytelling, conversations, rhymes, emergent literacy and numeracy activities, outdoor and indoor play. These opportunities will enable children to acquire not only the right foundation for development of skills prioritised for the 21st century, i.e. creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and self-confidence, but also an abiding interest in lifelong learning.

The second issue is the rigid structure of the primary grades’ curriculum, which changes annually with every grade, thus providing little or no opportunity for children to revisit the previous year’s curriculum. This rigidity comes possibly from a mistaken assumption made by curriculum framers that all children enter pre-school or a school grade at the prescribed age and move annually into the next grade, so that each grade is age-wise homogeneous; the reality is very different. Children tend to follow multiple pathways in these early years and it is difficult to predict at what age a child will be in which grade. Participation trends tend to stabilise only by the time children are around eight years old, when most come into the primary stage, often still in different grades. This leads to multi-age, multi-level composition at each level. Since age is a significant factor in learning, this diversity creates incompatibility with the given grade-wise curriculum and creates learning gaps for many children. This rigidity of the grade structure leads to cumulative learning deficits in children over time.

The foundational stage can address this rigidity, but for this the requirement would be to develop a progressive curriculum upward from pre-school to primary stage. Further, it has to be in a spiral, not linear, mode with adequate flexibility to enable children to revisit concepts and learn at their own pace. Most importantly, basing the curriculum on play-based, developmentally appropriate content and pedagogy will help children to develop holistically and enjoy the learning process, an imperative for not only school learning but learning for life.

Venita Kaul is professor emerita, education, Ambedkar University, Delhi