

## Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (NEP, 2020) -Urgency, Essential Skills, Challenges and The Integration of Key Areas

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### ABSTRACT

The most critical period for growth and development is the initial eight years of a child's life (ages 0 to 8), as this is when the foundation for comprehensive growth and learning is laid. Children who attend a high-quality preschool curriculum reach major social, educational, and intellectual milestones that set them apart from those who do not. Early childhood development is critical for children's long-term development and can significantly impact their school enrolment and involvement. According to research, high-quality early childhood education programs lower the likelihood of dropping out and repeating school and increase educational performance at all levels. With education systems worldwide faltering in various ways, which skills—and at what stage in a student's life—make the most significant difference in their long-term outcomes needs emphasis. Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills are one set of skills that international organizations place a high focus on. It is against this backdrop that the 2020 Policy on Education (NEP, 2020) strongly advocated that Foundational Literacy and Numeracy be strengthened in a mission mode and launched NIPUN- Bharat with a vision to ensure universal literacy and numeracy for Class 3 children by 2026-27 through coupling together of some critical areas.

**Keywords:** *FLN, NEP-2020, NIPUN Bharat, Learning Crisis, Key Skills*

Education systems are responsible for developing diverse abilities, including reading, numeracy, reasoning, socio-political, professional, cultural and others. However, children and adolescents in different countries lack basic literacy and numeracy skills despite years of education. According to Hwa, Kaffenberger, and Silberstein (2020), the education systems of different developing nations have a significant gap between what children are taught in school and what they already know and are capable of doing, which impedes learning and worsens learning disparities. In early life, only a small percentage of children receive access to cognitive stimulation (Gregor et al., 2007). With education systems worldwide faltering in various ways, which skills and at what stage in a student's life—make the most significant difference in their long-term outcomes needs emphasis. Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) abilities are one set of skills that international organizations place a high focus on. "Ensure that all youth and a considerable number of adults, including men and

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women, achieve literacy and numeracy" is an objective of the fourth Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4) (United Nations, 2016). The terms "learning crisis" (the problem) and "foundational literacy and numeracy" (the remedy) have been increasingly popular in recent years. The World Bank coined the concept "learning poverty," which focuses on reducing childhood illiteracy, and popularized the term "learning crisis" (World Bank, 2019a).

With 25 crore students registered in 15 lakh schools, India's educational system is the world's largest. We are on the verge of reaching universal primary enrollment, with half of our school-aged children enrolled in primary school. On the other hand, our schools fail to give students the foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) abilities they require (NEP, 2020, Para 2.1, p. 8). Numerous studies have demonstrated that high-quality preschool instruction and early learning equip kids for greater success in the future. A stimulating environment is essential for children's intellectual growth and comprehension. This calls for the availability of suitable infrastructure and other appropriate facilities, such as preschool instruction outside the home (Murlidharan and Kaul 1999). Studies show that preschoolers perform significantly better in early math and essential reading than their local school counterparts (Laosa and Ainsworth 2007). Because a child's cumulative brain growth takes place between the ages of three and seven, acquiring fundamental literacy and numeracy abilities is crucial. Because children who fall behind at a young age rarely catch up, these FLN skills are critical. The National Education Policy (2020) prioritizes the acquiring of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. "Only once this most basic learning criterion (i.e., foundational reading, writing, and arithmetic) is met will the remainder of this Policy become relevant for our children" (NEP, 2020 para 2.2).

### ***Objectives of the study***

1. To analyse the recommendations of National Education Policy-2020 on FLN.
2. To understand the FLN Skills as per NIPUN, 2021.
3. To understand the challenges in the attainment of FLN at the national level.
4. To highlight the integration of critical areas in improving FLN outcomes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Research work was conducted using primary sources like Policy Document, NEP-2020 and secondary sources like Websites, Journals and Newspapers, employing descriptive research study.

### ***Foundational Literacy & Numeracy (FLN)***

The term literacy is commonly used to describe the acquisition and use of the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, the so-called 3Rs, divided into literacy and numeracy. More recently, "literacy" has been defined as the ability to recognize, understand, decipher, produce, convey and quantify using written and printed resources associated with different scenarios, whereas numeracy was defined as the ability to reason and apply mathematical skills in day-to-day life (Litster, 2013). Literacy and numeracy are both motivators for successful partaking in social, cultural, political and economic happenings and for learning through life.

In the Indian milieu, Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) is the education of children of 3 to 8 years age. As per the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), FLN spans from preschool up to grade 2. Foundational literacy is the capability to comprehend and distinguish letters, read well-known words, and establish various forms of communication. Literacy assists students to read, write and speak clearly. Foundational numeracy is understanding and identifying numbers, discriminating between numbers, and performing basic mathematical

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calculations (addition or subtraction). Future education and lifetime learning both depend on the capacity to read, write, and execute basic mathematical operations. People with these skills can think critically and creatively, which advances the country (GOI, NEP 2020).

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 places a high priority on the attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by all children by the completion of class 3rd as an urgent national mission. National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN-Bharat) is a programme run by the Ministry of Education that outlines mission objectives and was launched with a vision to ensure universal literacy and numeracy for class 3 children by 2026-27. The mission will address the educational requirements of children aged three to nine. As a result, gaps associated with learning will be discovered. Moreover, the likely causes of these learning gaps will be dealt with and various techniques will be implemented, taking into account local conditions and the country's diversity. Furthermore, the goal is to create a strong connection and a smooth transition between the preschool period and the early grades. The NEP, 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat recommendations hold a lot of promise in terms of suggested improvements that can profoundly improve and turn around our children's learning levels. These include measures ensuring the child's language has a place in the classroom and the opportunity “Vidya Pravesh - A three-month preparation module” for an effective transition. There are suggestions regarding the use of scientific principles of learning for revision of curricula, revamping of assessments, professional development of teachers, and inclusion of technology to ensure that the appropriate systems focussing on ‘quality with scale’ are in place and ensure maximum gains for our early graders. For FLN Mission, a reliable IT system is recommended. The Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA), a nationwide digital platform for Indian school education is to be utilized as recommended by the FLN Mission. It was created in collaboration with NCERT and the Ministry of Education (NEP, 2020, p. 9). It has also specified the 'Lakshya' (goals) for each class, starting with Balvatika. It will test the overall capability to read age-appropriate texts both familiar and unfamiliar, with understanding, and while demonstrating basic numeracy abilities.

### *Essential Skills for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)*

#### **Essential Skills- Foundational Literacy:**

- **Oral Language Development:** Language is a tool children use to comprehend and connect the world to their personal experiences. Language is a crucial tool for understanding and transmitting information. It's also a requirement for learning how to read and write. Early opportunities for oral language development aid in developing the thinking and reasoning skills required for deeper reading.
- **Phonological Awareness:** It pertains to the knowledge of speech sounds, syllables, and rhymes.
- **Decoding:** It pertains capability to correctly pronounce written words using your knowledge of letter-sound associations, especially letter patterns.
- **Concept About Print:** It refers to the ability of knowing how to read a book, how to write a script (left to right, top to bottom, etc.), and that the text has significance.
- **Writing:** It is viewed in two dimensions: first, as the ability of self-expression in writing; and second, as the ability to accurately write the symbols of a script (form words & sentences).

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- **Culture of Reading:** It implies that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential and cultivating an inclusive and cheerful reading culture is critical. Thus, the importance of libraries in developing foundational literacy cannot be overstated.
- **Vocabulary:** The ability of not only being known to a word but also using the same in oral or written language.
- **Reading Comprehension:** The ability to read material with understanding. Comprehension is going into the details of a text.
- **Reading Fluency:** The ability of a person to read a given material at a specific speed, tone, and prosody while grasping what is being read (a minimum speed of 30-45 words per minute by grade 2).

### Essential skills - Foundational Numeracy:

- **Pre-math Concept:** It comprises the language learning of basic mathematics as lighter, heavier, smaller, bigger, between, front, back, etc.
- **Numbers and Operations:** Symbols, sound, amount, and number relations are all part of understanding numbers. Operations and number sense are inextricably linked. Multiple calculation strategies are included in operations, including calculations with the object, devised strategies, and the standard algorithm.
- **Measurement:** A skill that entails a comparison of length, weight, or capacity learned via practical experience and the use of nonstandard measurement tools.
- **Geometry:** It is concerned with basic shape recognition, spatial visualization, and reasoning.
- **Patterns:** Mathematics is the study of patterns, and children must be reinforced to identify and differentiate patterns in their daily lives and contexts in order to acquire this talent.

### Why FLN?

The magnitude of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) reflects from the scene that the children who do not learn to read with comprehension in the foundational years struggle to do so in later years. This is popularly termed the Matthew Effect. While the grade-level content advances, the learners continue to slide behind. The divide and the gap between the children struggling with reading in the early years and those who are proficient readers continue to deepen (Kapoor, Jhalani, Vinayak & Zutshi, 2021, p. 21). So many talented children become trapped in this awful black hole, unable to escape. This is a key reason for many pupils not attending school or dropping out entirely.

A fundamental challenge that children in India encounter in the early years of education needs thorough analysis in the context of the socioeconomic, psychological, and now technological gaps. Unfortunately, India's foundational literacy and numeracy situation is poor as statistics from different surveys [Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and National Achievement Surveys (NAS)] indicate inadequate reading, writing and numeracy skills across grades. The point of concern is not that children's performance is just low but has been declining in recent years. Furthermore, there are significant differences within the country, with certain states, such as Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana, clearly outperforming others, such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand (Kapoor, Jhalani, Vinayak & Zutshi, 2021, p. 9). Lack of focus on the quality of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy leads to generations of children who cannot become economically productive citizens, resulting in high economic and social costs. Early reading and numeracy abilities are essential for learning and linked to improved standard

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of life, personal well-being, national stability, and wealth, as well as being crucial for future educational success. Well-built literacy and numeracy skills assist students in learning, experimenting, reasoning, and creating and being engaged and educated citizens who contribute socially, culturally, and economically. Children's academic growth and motivation are hampered by a dearth of learning chances throughout the early stages of reading and numeracy acquisition, resulting in even lower achievement.

Various governmental and non-governmental studies show that we are presently experiencing a major crisis in terms of learning these most basic skills; according to the National Policy on Education (NEP, 2020, p.8): a large section of students (over five crores) enrolled presently in elementary school is lacking in the attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy skills. The NEP, 2020 also emphasizes the importance of confronting this situation front-on and acting so that core learning skills can be taught in classrooms and each child can benefit from a high-quality education. According to the NEP 2020, there will be a greater emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy to avoid the learning crisis. (NEP, 2020, pp. 8-9). Education will focus on cognitive growth as well as on character development and the evolution of holistic and versatile persons with critical 21st-century abilities. For this reason, our educational system will move from a summative examination that primarily measures rote learning abilities to more continuous and formative reviews (NEP, 2020, p. 9). The new system will be competency-based, encouraging children's learning and advancement while also assessing higher-order abilities like analysis, critical thinking, and conceptual clarity.

### ***Challenges associated with FLN?***

***A False Framing:*** The term "foundational" indicates that children must first accomplish specific aspects of numeracy and literacy and then any other learning can occur. Numeracy and literacy are ensured in a successful education system, but they are not the sole or primary goal.

***Creates a Division:*** Despite claims that FLN is aimed for all children, it is virtually exclusively a goal that is to be attained by children from remote and minoritized backgrounds, creating two distinct educational pathways in India: one for children in the upper echelon and large-fee private schools who will be able to focus on rich and comprehensive content, and the other for minority children in small-fee private/public schools who will not be able to go much beyond these key competencies. This has long-term ramifications since some children will be highly competent and more suitable for better careers, while others will be limited to literacy, with a limited pool of low-paying occupations to choose from.

In addition to the regular obstacles, Covid has added a new layer of complexity to the mix. While Covid prompted schools to close for an extended time, it also uncovered our unpreparedness regarding educational technology to reach early learners. There are hindrances to access at the family and the school level. Technology is of utmost potential. It is, however, a tool that must be used with prudence. There is ample evidence suggesting that scientifically and pedagogically relevant resources for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy are needed. As a nation, a dire need is there to identify these difficulties relating to children's foundational learning years; otherwise, we will breach our children's belief in us and their hopes for the future. Thus, a forward-looking approach will aid in facilitating the universal availability of high-quality education and equity for all children in pre-primary and primary school.

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### *Integrating the Key Skills:*

India announced a National Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) Mission on July 5, 2021, intending to achieve FLN by the completion of grade 3 by 2026-27. This is an important first step on a national scale. However, we will not be able to attain this aim if we continue doing business as usual. Successful FLN programmes have indicated that focusing on three important areas that should be firmly coupled together can improve FLN outcomes in the short term.

#### 1) **Goal Alignment:**

- Establish explicit, quantifiable, and realistic learning objectives.
- Align expectations for all stakeholders, including teachers, middle management, parents, and policymakers, so that the focus is shifted away from inputs and processes and toward accomplishing learning objectives.

#### 2) **Academic Support:**

- Provide structured pedagogy materials, such as teacher guides with lesson plans that are closely connected to learning objectives, textbooks, workbooks, and assessments,
- Ensure that TLM (for example, textbooks and workbooks) and instructional design accommodate multigrade and multi-level scenarios,
- Provide excellent training for instructors on how to use tools and improve pedagogical techniques,
- Use a blended strategy for training to reduce dilution by using cascade and

#### 3) **Monitoring:**

- Improve the quality of existing monitoring tools for tracking teaching quality and student development in relation to FLN objectives,
- Evaluate the effectiveness of training to identify design and delivery flaws,
- Make reliable information a priority and establish systems to optimize data integrity,
- Use data frequently for diagnosis, assistance, and course correction.

Implementing the NEP's recommendation for low-stakes competency-based essential stage exams in elementary grades will aid in this goal. Moreover, improving the quality of teaching through pre-service education reforms, aligning actor incentives with learning outcome improvement, and improving the quality of school education expenditure are critical structural issues that will lay the groundwork for a school system that can deliver universal foundational literacy and numeracy.

## **CONCLUSION**

Every child goes on a path to gain new knowledge and skills that will aid in their development as human capital and as a vital tool for economic advancement. This results from a robust early schooling foundation (Kapoor, Jhalani, Vinayak & Zutshi, 2021, p.13). The importance of achieving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy is strongly mentioned in the National Education Policy (2020). "Solely, when this most central learning criterion (i.e., foundational reading, writing, and arithmetic) is met, will the rest of this Policy become pertinent for our kids" (NEP 2020, Para 2.2). The Ministry of Education in India initiated the NIPUN Bharat mission, along with a concrete action guideline for states, to make sure that every child in India has accomplished foundational literacy and numeracy by the completion of Grade 3 by 2026-27. The learning outcomes from preschool to grade three have been defined for this purpose (3-9 years). The mission guidelines advocate for a change to competency-based education and use school-based assessment to provide teachers with continuous feedback. States must develop State Missions, District Missions, and Block Missions that align with the National

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Mission and guarantee that the learning outcomes are met. Making foundational literacy a priority for parents and political leaders by making it more visible is a vital lever to work on to sustain advances in learning outcomes over time. The FLN Guidelines also recommend interacting constructively with the stakeholders to promote consciousness and involve all in the children's learning process. Although the endeavor is an objectively desirable reform, its formulation and implementation raise several concerns that must be addressed.

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