

Panel Briefing

The Elephant Moves: #TheIndiaDialog 2024 Institute for Competitiveness | US-Asia Technology Management Center, Stanford University

“The Challenge of Foundational Learning and Numeracy”

Introduction

India's commitment to transforming its educational landscape is embodied in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Recognising the critical role of foundational learning and numeracy (FLN), the nation has focused greater attention on these areas, with progress evident but also significant challenges remaining. The panel discussion on ‘The Challenge of Foundational Learning and Numeracy’ examined this complex scenario, revealing both successes and urgent areas for action. The panel was moderated by **Pranjal Sharma**, economic analyst, advisor and author, with esteemed speakers including **Michael Bowers**, Chief Program Implementation Officer, Room to Read; **Bhavya Durgesh Nandini**, Adolescent Well Being Advocate; **Karen Klimowski**, Deputy Mission Director, USAID; **Dr. Omar Qargha**, Fellow, Center of Universal Education, Brookings; and **Gurcharan Das**, Author.

Assessment of Progress in Foundational Education

The release of the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Report marked a significant milestone in assessing India's education policy and its implementation progress. The report highlighted a shift towards greater accountability and transparency in evaluating foundational learning outcomes. The discussion provided insights into the progress made in literacy and numeracy at the district and state levels, highlighting the policy's multilingual approach as a response to India's diverse linguistic landscape. While acknowledging advancements, the speakers also shed light on the persistent challenges, including inefficiencies and gaps, particularly in areas such as teacher capacity and accountability issues in service delivery. Despite these hurdles, there is assurance regarding the government's willingness to experiment with new models, indicating a proactive stance towards educational reform and improvement.

The discussion centred on the importance of formative assessment in India. This ongoing process, seamlessly integrated into daily classroom activities, allows teachers to continuously monitor student's progress in FLN, identify learning gaps, and adapt instruction accordingly. Formative assessments are designed to focus on providing students with constructive feedback so they can refine their understanding and skills.

Challenges in teacher's capacity and governance

Delving deeper into the challenges impeding educational attainment, experts on the panel highlighted the crucial role teachers play in FLN development. However, deep-rooted training gaps persist. Too often, teachers lack a fundamental understanding of the latest pedagogical approaches to FLN, the ability to differentiate instruction for the diverse needs in their classrooms, and access to ongoing professional development for capacity building. The absence of consistent mentoring systems leaves many teachers feeling isolated with limited guidance on how to navigate

classroom challenges effectively. The discussion stressed the alarming statistics revealing a lack of basic math and literacy skills, especially among rural youth. The insights raised poignant questions about the efficacy of catch-up initiatives and the need for holistic education that incorporates both hard and soft skills. These challenges emphasise the urgent need for professional development among teachers, leveraging their experience while introducing innovative teaching methods and technology.

Successful implementation of the FLN vision outlined in the NEP requires alignment across all levels of government. The panel highlighted a fragmented governance structure, with states holding primary responsibility, leading to variations in the interpretation and implementation of national policy. Accountability mechanisms linking resources, actions, and measured student outcomes are relatively weak. Concerns related to governance and teacher quality were discussed in detail, implying prevalent issues such as absenteeism, lack of qualification, and corruption within the education system. The chasm in FLN outcomes between government-run schools and privately-run schools continues to be a national crisis, with uneven teacher qualifications contributing to the disparity. Children from the most disadvantaged communities typically attend government schools, further perpetuating cycles of educational and socioeconomic disadvantage. The panel also acknowledged that factors outside the classroom significantly influence FLN's success. Nutritional deficiencies, limited access to educational resources at home, and a lack of parental engagement with children's early literacy and numeracy development can all hinder progress.

Interventions and Strategies for Improvement in FLN

The discussion further entailed towards proposing well-planned strategies to address the multifaceted challenges of educational reform. The speakers emphasised the importance of a national dialogue to define the broader purposes of education, advocating for a transformative change away from traditional models towards a more inclusive approach. USAID's initiatives were discussed, which mainly focused on comprehensive teacher training, mother tongue instruction, library access, and advocacy for increased resources, particularly for girl's education. These initiatives highlighted a systematic approach to educational improvement, emphasising policy reform, teacher empowerment, and community engagement as key pillars of change. The discussion focused on the urgent need for combined efforts to encourage lifelong learning and equitable access to quality education, placing education as a catalyst for socio-economic development and inclusive growth in India. The panel outlined several critical areas which can significantly impact India's FLN progress:

- **Prioritise Professional Development of Teachers:** A progressive transformation of teacher education and support mechanisms is vital. Different levels of service and training are required to equip new teachers with pedagogical knowledge and practical classroom strategies. These training programs must be continuous, focused, and accessible. They need to go beyond just content knowledge and help teachers understand how to differentiate instruction, address diverse student needs, and utilise technology effectively within the classroom.
- **Encourage Active Learning and Student Engagement:** The shift away from rote learning to active, inquiry-based methodologies is central to the NEP's philosophy. This holds particular significance for FLN instruction. Engaging young learners by making learning relevant to their lives, building connections to real-world problems, and utilising play-based approaches will help instil an interest in learning. It is especially crucial to create

inclusive learning environments where children from non-literate homes and diverse linguistic backgrounds feel safe, supported, and seen within the classroom dynamic.

- **Emphasise Multilingual Approaches:** India's remarkable linguistic diversity demands a rethinking of the language of instruction. Early instruction in a child's mother tongue, with a carefully planned transition to the state language and English, will ensure that students don't fall behind while developing a strong conceptual base in foundational education. Teachers need intensive support in understanding multilingual methodologies, helping them create a classroom environment where all students feel valued regardless of their linguistic origin. Simultaneously, developing high-quality FLN teaching materials in India's multiple languages is a complex undertaking. Strategies such as leveraging technology-assisted translation tools and encouraging community involvement in resource development can help address this need. Responsibly integrated technology has the potential to transform teacher professional development. Online courses, virtual mentoring programs, and peer-to-peer learning platforms can reduce geographic barriers and provide teachers with access to quality support and ongoing learning.

India stands at a significant junction in its educational journey. By investing in teacher capacity building, adopting student-centric pedagogies that embrace India's multilingual realities, leveraging the power of technology while addressing equity concerns, and rethinking assessment, India can ensure that every child has the foundation they need for a lifetime of learning, growth, and success.