

# The early years continuum

An interview with Dr Venita Kaul<sup>1</sup>

I must congratulate ASER for including early childhood, especially the 4-year-olds and the pre-schoolers, into this survey for the first time because to date there is no large scale data set for this stage of education. On the one hand, we as a government, as an academic community, as a research community, as a people interested in international development, development agencies, everyone is talking about the criticality of the early years of life. There is an undisputed acknowledgement of how important this stage is. And on the other hand, we are also very concerned about the learning crisis in this country which ASER Centre and the NAS have been demonstrating for many years. But in this context, in our discourse to address this crisis, a very important basic principle that is easy to forget is that the learning process is a continuum. It is a continuous process. What we see at the primary stage is a reflection of what the status is at the early childhood stage, which is so much more critical. That's why it is important to address the initial stages. Actually birth to age 3 is the most critical period, because that is when the brain develops at the most rapid pace, but we are looking at the next stage, the period when children have started to learn in an organized and more structured way. There are certain critical periods of learning within this stage that are foundational for later school learning, and so if we are concerned about the learning crisis, then how can we ignore this stage?

The India Early Childhood Education Impact study (IECEI) study that ASER Centre and CECED<sup>2</sup> at Ambedkar University Delhi did together, with its large sample and important findings, was a significant contributor to the draft National Education Policy (NEP) because we had convincing evidence to show that it matters if any country invests in young children. Thanks to the study we were able to talk about the multiple pathways that had to be addressed, the need for flexibility, and the emphasis on the early continuum for later learning. This has indeed been addressed in the draft policy, which has thus taken a more informed perspective that is contemporary and locates early childhood education within the larger crisis of learning.

Unfortunately, the NEP has taken only a partial perspective on this. The emphasis has to be on the continuum - one has to look at pre-school alongside primary school, not in isolation, because the child is common to both; the same child is going to both. We say the age for early childhood is 3 to 6 years, and 6 to 14 is the elementary school age group. But most states have 5-year-olds going to Std I across the country, as the ASER data also shows. The prescribed official age for Std I is usually 5+, which is in complete disregard for any sort of understanding of children or child development, because on one hand you require a child of this age going to pre-school or Anganwadi to be exposed to an integrated curriculum, but it seems that if the same child goes to Std I she does not require any of that! Also, the fact is that there is a non-linearity in early participation which the IECEI study has shown up, where we have 4-year-olds sitting in Std I and 7-year-olds in pre-school. The important thing therefore is to see that the early childhood curriculum should match with the reality rather than with our assumptions. Our study showed that there is a huge developmental difference between the performance of a 5-year-old and 6-year-old, which we are not considering: we are going straight to offering a 5-year-old what a 6-year-old should be offered.

And then we have children of varying ages and varying patterns who have gone through different kinds of early experiences, all of whom are coming into the primary school system. When each grade is multi-age and multi-level, how can it be offered just one syllabus, that too an annual syllabus that starts in July or April and ends in March? Whatever level the child is in March, we end there and then proceed to the next level, which does not match what the child needs or has understood, or provide a child the opportunity to revisit and learn. This linearity in the curriculum, especially when learning is more spiral in nature, is what leads to a cumulative deficit in learning of which the learning crisis is a reflection. It's so important to see these factors together, especially if we have to consider the way forward.

Unfortunately, there is a hesitation on the part of those associated with primary education curriculum to 'see' things differently from where they are used to starting. There was somebody who said that in pre-school we teach 'children', but in primary school we teach 'subjects'. Perhaps that difference in perspective is where it comes from: the understanding that this is the defined syllabus from which we have to teach, regardless of who is being taught - adult, child or infant. We have to start from the alphabet, numbers - this is the technical understanding of people engaged with primary education, who do not give the required

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attention to thinking about who the learner is. There is thus a huge gap between the understanding of the learner and what has to be learnt. There is no continuity or consonance between the two.

The NEP while rightly highlighting the early stage from 3 to 8 years as the foundational stage, should have had an integrated chapter on pre-school and foundational learning which should have viewed the age group 3 to 8 or even 3 to 11 together, in order to address these specific foundational issues. It is commendable that the Committee has thought in terms of restructuring school education into sub-stages of 5+3+2+2 and given importance to foundational learning, but the curriculum also needs to be relooked at, especially to explore how to help the transition of children who are coming from homes that are very different from what they used to be in terms of a learning environment, with a lot of first generation learners coming in. The curriculum should make the transition for this section of learners easier. The curriculum and syllabus need to be much more dynamic in the sense of accommodating to the context.

A very worrisome situation in early childhood that we saw clearly in the IECEI study, and the subsequent analysis we did for a recent publication that we brought out, is that across the board mainly didactic and formal teaching is taking place in pre-schools, which is actually a downward extension of the primary school. We saw very little of what is considered developmentally appropriate play-based curricular practice. Our analysis shows that formal teaching is actually counterproductive for learning since it has an inverse relationship with school readiness and thus negates much of the potential gains from pre-school education.

In terms of the ASER data that has now come in, I look forward to getting some very vital evidence for this stage. Of course we first need to know what percentage of children actually participates in pre-school, but beyond that, if we assume that they are not getting a developmentally appropriate curriculum, then how is this reflected in their school readiness on school entry, and their learning outcomes in school? My hypothesis (based on my own studies and others on a smaller scale) is that children learn both number recognition and counting very fast by rote, which is how they are able to move forward. Subsequently rote becomes the critical mediator for learning, at the cost of conceptual understanding. Even the algorithms that they are expected to do are more through rote, without the corresponding conceptual understanding. While Std I and Std II are still managed by rote, from Std III onwards, where the curriculum requires more application and conceptual understanding, they start faltering. And this is how we have a crisis where arithmetic is concerned. Similar issues are there in language learning as well.

These are some of the very interesting and fascinating questions related to curriculum and the learning process, both from the perspective of diagnostics of learning as well as from the point of view of curriculum development, and also from the point of view of advocacy. We know that early childhood education can nullify equity gaps, but that can happen only if it is a good quality early childhood education. So, is the kind of early childhood education that we have now actually nullifying those equity gaps or widening them? There's also the whole question of gender because again, in the IECEI study, we found that girls are pushed more into the government systems and are in anganwadis, government primary schools etc. whereas boys are put more into private schools. Is this happening across all states, or are there state or regional differences? To what extent is gender a factor? To what extent is the state a factor? Then of course the IECEI study also identified a major trend of multiple pathways in the initial years, with 4-year-olds sitting in Std I and 7-year-olds in pre-school. Those findings are what actually led to the NEP recommending foundational learning in a flexible mode. Is this phenomenon evident at scale also? Last but not least, ASER has developed and used a tool for psychosocial development, which has been a challenge internationally in terms of measurement at scale. It will be very important to see whether the ASER tool is able to discriminate among children appropriately, whether there are consistencies or associations between social-emotional learning and cognitive or language or any other domain. Of course ASER is not a longitudinal sample but it will hopefully provide robust data on all of these questions, which will definitely add weight to the importance of looking at the early years as a continuum.