**Early Literacy and Numeracy for quality education**

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**Abstract:**

Early childhood, particularly from birth to age 8, is a pivotal period for development. Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and listen effectively to communicate, understand, and interpret information in various contexts. Numeracy is the ability to understand, interpret, and work with numbers and mathematical concepts in everyday life. NEP 2020 identifies the first eight years as critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development. By focusing on child-centered practices, empowering educators and parents, leveraging technology, and advocating for policy reforms, we can build a strong foundation for quality education and lifelong learning

**Key Words:** Literacy, Numeracy, National Education Policy

**Introduction:**

Early childhood, particularly from birth to age 8, is a pivotal period for development. During these formative years, foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy are crucial for a child’s later success in school and life *(Sanwal, S).* They help shaping a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. These skills, which begin to develop from birth, form the cornerstone of future learning, enabling children to effectively engage with the world around them.

**Definition of Literacy and Numeracy**

**Literacy**

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and listen effectively to communicate, understand, and interpret information in various contexts. It encompasses the skills needed to decode written text, comprehend language, express thoughts, and engage meaningfully with diverse forms of communication.

* **Language Proficiency:** Building vocabulary and comprehension.
* **Communication Skills:** Encouraging children to express their thoughts and ideas.
* **Love for Reading:** Cultivating curiosity and imagination through stories.

**Numeracy**

Numeracy is the ability to understand, interpret, and work with numbers and mathematical concepts in everyday life. It involves skills such as counting, measuring, recognizing patterns, solving problems, and applying mathematical reasoning to make decisions and solve real-world challenges.

* **Logical Thinking:** Understanding relationships between numbers and concepts.
* **Problem-Solving:** Building critical thinking abilities.
* **Practical Application:** Applying math in real-world contexts like measuring and sorting.

**Importance of early literacy and numeracy:**

1. **Language Development:** From birth, children are soaking in language from their environment. Early interactions with caregivers, whether verbal or non-verbal, shape how children learn to communicate. Reading aloud, engaging in meaningful conversations, and providing a rich language environment help children develop vocabulary, comprehension, and listening skills. These early language skills are directly linked to later literacy abilities.
2. **Reading and Writing:** Literacy is more than just learning to read and write; it's about the development of a wide range of skills. Early exposure to books, storytelling, and writing activities—whether it's drawing, scribbling, or attempting to write letters—helps children develop the necessary skills for later reading and writing proficiency. When children are encouraged to engage with books and drawing materials, they start to understand concepts like letter-sound relationships, story structure, and written language.
3. **Numeracy Development:** Numeracy, like literacy, begins at an early age, often through everyday interactions and experiences. Parents and caregivers can introduce concepts of numbers, counting, patterns, shapes, and measurements simply by engaging children in routine activities such as sorting toys, counting objects during play, or measuring ingredients while cooking. These activities promote mathematical thinking and a foundation for more complex concepts.
4. **Brain Development and Critical Early Experiences:** Research supports that early experiences are essential in shaping the brain’s architecture. The first three years of life are particularly significant, as this is when the brain forms the majority of its neural connections. High-quality, interactive experiences, such as reading, playing, and communicating, strengthen these connections and lay the groundwork for cognitive and social-emotional development. Brain research emphasizes the importance of a stimulating and supportive environment to foster positive outcomes in early learning.
5. **Role of Parents and Caregivers:** The home learning environment is a crucial factor in the development of both literacy and numeracy skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Parents and caregivers who actively engage with children—through talking, reading together, drawing, playing with numbers, and providing learning materials—create opportunities for development that might not happen otherwise. Positive early experiences and a strong parent-child connection are key to nurturing curiosity, problem-solving skills, and a love for learning.

**National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Key Highlights and Focus on Early Literacy and Numeracy**

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a transformative framework aimed at revamping the education system to make it more holistic, inclusive, and equitable. It emphasizes foundational learning, lifelong learning, and adaptability to the demands of the 21st century.

NEP 2020 identifies the first eight years as critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development *(Agarwal, C. and Sethi, C. 2022).* To address the learning crisis in early literacy and numeracy, the policy introduces the following measures:

1. **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mission (FLN)**

**Objective:** To ensure that all children attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3.

**Intervention:** Special emphasis on activity-based learning, storytelling, and play.

**Target:** Eradicate "learning poverty," where children cannot read or understand basic texts.

1. **Revised Curriculum Structure:**

The policy introduces a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, with the first five years forming the foundational stage:

**Focus:** Multisensory learning, language development, and basic math skills.

**Approach:** Play-based, discovery-oriented, and experiential methods of teaching.

1. **Development of Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs)**

* Creation of age-appropriate and culturally relevant resources for foundational learning.
* Integration of technology for interactive and personalized learning experiences.

1. **Capacity Building of Educators**

* Strengthening pre-service and in-service training for teachers specializing in early childhood education.
* Continuous professional development programs to enhance pedagogy for foundational literacy and numeracy.

1. **Inclusion of Regional Languages**

* The medium of instruction up to Grade 5 (and preferably Grade 8) will be the mother tongue or regional language to facilitate better comprehension and retention.

**Way Forward**

To ensure the effective development of early literacy and numeracy, stakeholders must adopt a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Below are key strategies for advancing quality education in these areas:

1. **Strengthening Early Learning Programs**

* **Play-Based Learning**: Incorporate play as a central component of teaching to make learning engaging and developmentally appropriate.
* **Integrated Curriculum**: Blend literacy and numeracy activities into everyday routines, focusing on real-life applications.
* **Culturally Relevant Materials**: Use resources that reflect children’s cultural backgrounds and experiences to foster inclusivity.

1. **Enhancing Teacher Training and Support**

* **Specialized Training**: Equip early childhood educators with skills to foster literacy and numeracy through age-appropriate methods.
* **Ongoing Professional Development**: Provide access to workshops, seminars, and mentoring for continuous learning.
* **Use of Technology**: Train teachers to integrate digital tools for interactive and personalized learning experiences.

1. **Empowering Parents and Communities**

* **Parental Education**: Offer workshops to guide parents on fostering literacy and numeracy at home through reading, storytelling, and play.
* **Community Involvement**: Establish community-based learning centres that provide resources such as books, toys, and learning materials.
* **Collaboration**: Foster partnerships between schools, families, and local organizations to create a supportive learning ecosystem.

1. **Leveraging Technology and Innovation**

* **Interactive Tools**: Use apps and games designed for early literacy and numeracy to enhance engagement and accessibility.
* **Remote Learning**: Expand access to quality educational content for children in underserved areas through mobile and online platforms.
* **Data-Driven Insights**: Use assessment tools to track progress and tailor interventions to individual needs.

**Conclusion:**

In summary, early literacy and numeracy are not isolated skills; they are embedded in everyday experiences and interactions. These foundational skills are essential to a child’s overall development and provide a strong basis for academic success later in life. Through supportive and stimulating environments, both at home and in early childhood education settings, children can build the language, cognitive, and social skills that will shape their future learning.

A holistic and collaborative approach is essential for advancing early literacy and numeracy. By focusing on child-centered practices, empowering educators and parents, leveraging technology, and advocating for policy reforms, we can build a strong foundation for quality education and lifelong learning.

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