



## Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

This editorial is based on [“Is the Push for Foundational Numeracy and Literacy Pro-Poor?”](#) which was published in Hindustan Times on 24/03/2022. It talks about the issues with the concept of formulating learning as only the mastery of piecemeal basic literacy and numeracy.

**For Prelims:** Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), NIPUN-Bharat Programme, National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, Samagra Shiksha, Teacher Training Initiatives

**For Mains:** National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 - Significance and Challenges, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) - significance and challenges.

The [National Education Policy \(NEP\), 2020](#) prioritises the attainment of **foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN)** for all children as an “urgent national mission”. Subsequent guidelines for the same were laid out in the Ministry of Education’s [National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy \(NIPUN-Bharat\)](#) programme in 2021.

Although the initiative is an objectively good reform, its framing and operationalisation entail certain issues that need scrutiny.

Reading proficiency or arithmetic skills are very important. However, formulating learning as only the mastery of piecemeal reading and arithmetic skills entails a simultaneous **overlooking of and lack of imagination around other holistic components** of learning.

### What is Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)?

- FLN is broadly conceptualised as a **child’s ability to read basic texts and solve basic maths problems** (such as addition and subtraction).
  - Foundational Literacy and Numeracy is one of the major themes of the **NEP 2020**.
- In 2021, the NIPUN-Bharat programme was launched with a vision to ensure **universal literacy and numeracy for Class 3 children by 2026-27**.
  - It envisaged a **five-tier implementation mechanism**, set up at the National- State- District- Block- School level in all States and UTs, under the aegis of the **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** of **Samagra Shiksha**.
- **Arguments in the favour** of FLN say that the ability to read and write, and perform basic operations with numbers i.e., FLN, is a **necessary foundation and an indispensable prerequisite** for all future schooling and lifelong learning.
  - The Foundational Learning study will enable to **establish benchmarks in reading with comprehension** in different Indian languages for children at Grade 3 level.
  - It will **assess the ability to read age-appropriate texts** (known as well as unknown) at a certain pace, accurately, and with comprehension and also the foundational numeracy skills.

## What are the Issues Associated with FLN?

- **Encourages Rote-Learning:** Since long, rote-learning has been seen as the core problem in the Indian education system - **de-contextualised repetition of facts, reciting without questioning**, and a **general lack of critical thinking** are the impediments to holistic forms of learning.
  - A monitoring system that judges performance based on FLN mastery will likely lead to states and schools **intensifying rote-learning to avoid bad results**.
  - It is exactly this fear of failing in standardised assessments that perpetuates rote-learning and paves the way for **“teaching to the test”** — where teaching, resources, and time are all redirected away from learning towards **mere assessment mastery**.
- **A False Framing:** The word foundational implies that certain aspects of numeracy and literacy must come first before any other learning can happen. A good education system ensures numeracy and literacy, but without making them its single or primary purpose.
  - A **single-minded focus on these basics** not only creates a risk of decontextualized and rote learning but also implies that richer learning and critical thinking only come afterwards.
  - **Reading without questioning and calculating without understanding** its relevance are **not quite the foundations for any possible critical thinking** but might even lead away from it.
- **Creates a Division:** Despite claims of how FLN is a goal for all children, its prioritisation is almost **exclusively meant to be for children from rural and marginalised backgrounds**, thus creating **two separate tracks** within Indian education —
  - One with children in elite and high-fee private schools getting to focus on rich and holistic content and the other with marginalised children in low-fee private/public schools, who will not be able to go much beyond these foundational skills.
  - This presents significant long-term implications with **some children being highly skilled and more suited** for elite professions, and **others relegated to being just literate** and thus **facing a limited pool of low-earning professions** to be eligible for.

## What is the Way Ahead?

- **Parallel Approach:** The current education system, the policymakers as well as the people must **overcome this misconceived sequential understanding** of “basics first and critical thinking afterwards” and find a **new approach where basic learning and critical thinking run parallel**.
  - The children need not be made to spend several years mastering FLN to pass a test, they need to be **prepared to achieve contemporary educational goals** such as critical thinking, curiosity, or empowerment.
- **Teacher Training:** The **District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs)** often have **high vacancies, insufficient funds, and severe constraints** impeding them from acting responsive to local needs.
  - This core function of an education system requires a **strong public sector, sufficient human resources, and a proper infrastructure**.
  - Policymakers should also consider **increasing budgetary allocations for teacher training** institutions and reformulate their mission and mandate to **ensure increased discretion and an empowered faculty**.
- **Revised Learning Approach:** Education systems in many countries, in an attempt to boost learning quality, have moved away from teaching reading and mathematics in incremental, skill-based ways.
  - **Culturally responsive teaching**, which strives to **make learning relevant to the lived realities of children**, and critical mathematics education, which teaches maths as a tool to critically read the world, are among several approaches widely sought after by schools worldwide.
  - These approaches include mastering basic reading and maths skills as **part of richer, contextual learning rather than a prerequisite**.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

### Q. What is the aim of the programme 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan'? (2017)

- (a) Achieving 100% literacy by promoting collaboration between voluntary organisations and government's education system and local communities.
- (b) Connecting institutions of higher education with local communities to address development challenges through appropriate technologies.
- (c) Strengthening India's scientific research institutions in order to make India a scientific and technological power.
- (d) Developing human capital by allocating special funds for health care and education of rural and urban poor, and organising skill development programmes and vocational training for them.

**Ans: (b)**

### Q. Consider the following statements: (2018)

1. As per the Right to Education (RTE) Act, to be eligible for appointment as a teacher in a State, a person would be required to possess the minimum qualification laid down by the concerned State Council of Teacher Education.
2. As per the RTE Act, for teaching primary classes a candidate is required to pass a Teacher Eligibility Test conducted in accordance with the National Council of Teacher Education guidelines.
3. In India, more than 90% of teacher education institutions are directly under the State Governments.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) 3 only

**Ans: (b)**