



Language and Literacy in Draft National Education Policy (DNEP), 2016

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In this paper, we take a brief look at how language and literacy have been addressed in the 43-page document – *Some Inputs for Draft National Education Policy* (MHRD, 2016b; hereafter DNEP). We believe that it is not possible to understand DNEP without reading it in conjunction with the 217-page *National Policy on Education 2016: Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy* (MHRD, 2016a; hereafter CENEP). Hence, we have considered both in our commentary. (Strangely, CENEP is not listed among the ‘Relevant Documents’ on the MHRD website!) We first take a look at policies related to language, then literacy.

Language in DNEP-2016

Language is dealt with directly in only one section of DNEP – ‘Language and Culture in Education’ (pp 30-31). The Three Language Formula (TLF), people’s desire for English and instruction in the mother tongue (or first language) are the three issues related to language it lightly touches upon. It notes that TLF is being followed unevenly in the country, ‘...there are deviations in the implementation of TLF in many states’ (p 30). CENEP is more explicit about the situation:

6.13.11 Not all States are providing education in three languages up to the secondary stage; in fact, the variations in so many states, as well as local variations within states are of such nature that it can be even argued that the TLF is observed more in the breach than as a national policy. In some States, only two languages, the State language and English are being taught, presumably for political reasons. In some of the Hindi-speaking States the TLF is of-ten interpreted as providing for the study of Sanskrit in place of any other modern Indian language; indeed contrary to the spirit of the TLF no South Indian language is generally taught in most schools in Hindi speaking states. Some Boards of School Education allow students to pass the secondary school examination with only English and another foreign language, permitting them even to avoid learning Hindi or any regional language.

DNEP’s recommendations regarding TLF are:

Knowledge of English plays an important role in the national and international mobility of students and provides an access to global knowledge. Hence, it is important to make children proficient in reading and writing English. Therefore, if the medium of instruction up to primary level is the mother tongue or local or regional language, the second language will be English and the choice of the third language (at the upper primary and secondary levels) will be with the individual states and local authorities, in keeping with the Constitutional provisions. (p. 31)

The autonomy of ‘individual states and local authorities’ to choose the third language of instruction sounds positive. But, it is the first language of the school that is the problem for children of Indigenous Peoples and Linguistic Minorities (IPLM). It is imperative, therefore, that we pay close attention to what the document says about mother tongue instruction.

We find that DNEP appears to endorse mother tongue medium education. DNEP acknowledges that ‘Students learn most effectively when taught through their mother tongue’ (p. 40). But this is diluted in the very next sentence, ‘On the other hand, there is a growing demand for learning English language and schools with English as medium of instructions’. The phrase ‘On the other hand’ suggests that a mother tongue education and learning English are somehow opposed to each other. Successful bilingual education systems worldwide show that this is a false opposition: children can and do learn both the mother tongue and the ‘other tongue’ up to a high level.

In acknowledging that mother tongue education is best, DNEP echoes CENEP:

6.13.18 The Committee agrees with the view expressed in the 1968 National Policy on Education that: ‘The energetic development of Indian languages and literature is a sine qua non for educational and cultural development. Unless this is done, the creative energies of the people will not be released, standards of education will not improve, knowledge will not spread to the people,

and the gulf between the intelligentsia and the masses will remain, if not widen further'(p. 98).

Fine words. But precious little of that commitment seems to have translated into policy.

DNEP's policy initiatives regarding language include All states and Union Territories, if they so desire, may provide education in schools, up to Class V, in the mother-tongue, local or regional language as the medium of instruction (p. 31).

After declaring that learning outcomes are best in the mother tongue, the document adds the following riders: 'if they so desire', 'may provide education', 'mother-tongue, local or regional language'. All these are claw-backs and cop outs that legitimise denying mother tongue education to children of IPLM.

It should also be noted that it is in the matter of the education of these children that DNEP and CENEP are most egregious. It is here that we see that mother tongue education, in fact, means pre-primary education! The first mention of language in DNEP occurs halfway through the 40-page document. In the section on 'Inclusive Education and Student Support', the document observes, 'Education level of tribal children is a matter of grave concern.... Language and communication is also a problem for non-tribal teachers working in tribal areas' (DNEP 2016, p 23). In the Policy Initiatives in that section, we read:

'Experience has shown that tribal children have difficulty in understanding and learning in the regional language which is usually the medium of instruction. To overcome this impediment, steps will be taken to ensure that, wherever required, multi-lingual education will be introduced'. (DNEP 2016, p. 24)

The fact that children do not know the regional language is seen as an 'impediment' (with its associations of a physical defect). The system will 'overcome' this 'impediment' through 'multi-lingual education'. To understand what this 'multi-lingual education' is, we need to go back to CENEP. In the section on 'Education of Tribal Children', CENEP notes

6.12.16 In some interactions the Committee was told that tribals find it difficult to understand

the regional language which is the medium of instruction. However, the general feeling was that while the medium should be [the] regional language, in the initial grades, it should be taught through local dialect [the local dialect or a local dialect – we are not told]. The Committee was informed that already there are several programmes under implementation in states having a large tribal population where the teacher teaches in tribal dialect of the area. In other states efforts are being made to produce bi-lingual text books. In the initial stages teachers would need training and requisite learning material in local dialects (p. 95).

Notice the casual and disparaging label, 'dialect' for indigenous languages – for the Committee, tribals evidently possess only dialects, not languages. CENEP notes:

6.13.13 In implementing a language policy, primacy should be given to the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the initial stages, before the child enters primary school. This is imperative, as repeated studies have indicated that basic concepts of language and arithmetic are best learnt in one's mother tongue. Indeed, a child learns the mother tongue naturally from her home and societal environment. At the pre-primary level and in Anganwadis, the emphasis should be on reinforcing this knowledge and establishing a sound foundation for all future education based on the children's mother tongue, including tribal languages.

The child's mother tongue has a place only in the Anganwadis, not once the child enters school. CENEP recommends the following:

9.23.6 It is the experience of many states that tribal children find it difficult to understand regional language which is the medium of instruction. To overcome this difficulty while the medium should be the regional language in the initial grades, classroom transactions should be through local dialects (p. 193).

In sum, the 2016 draft to the National Education Policy

- continues to deny mother tongue medium education to children of IPLM, even while paying lip-service to its importance;

- in effect, actively promotes a policy of linguistic assimilation;
- thus setting the stage for poor cognitive and emotional outcomes for children of IPLM.

Literacy Education

We have only a little to add to the conversation on early literacy, because it does not find mention at all in the document! The main point we wish to make is that its absence in a national policy on education is a serious gap that needs attention. Where literacy is mentioned in the document (and it does find several mentions), it is used in relation to adult literacy and lifelong learning, and terms such as ‘basic literacy’, ‘functional literacy and so on, are used to characterise it.

We would like to make the argument that, with large numbers of first-generation learners entering our classrooms under Education For All and Right to Education policies and with so many of them failing to learn, we need to take a closer look at why this failure is occurring. At several points the document notes the poor quality of learning in the primary and upper-primary stages, and notes that these effects, laid down in the early years, cascade to secondary schooling finally reaching up to higher education. However, it leaves this aspect largely unanalysed, except in terms of attributing it mainly to issues related to teacher quality, motivation, absenteeism, schools not adhering to norms, slow progress in the use of ICT and so on (p. 8). Reading and writing underlie much of school-based learning—including content-area learning. Children’s failure to learn to read and write proficiently in the early grades (as documented in several large-scale studies) sets up a weak foundation for all other school-based learning. It further sets them up as semi-literate for life—not able to read and write proficiently either for their own learning or pleasure, or for more practical purposes, such as employment opportunities. Therefore, we need a considered stance and policy towards the teaching of early reading and writing in schools. Simply stating that children should be taught three languages is, in our opinion, insufficient in terms of developing an informed position on issues related to early literacy.

The MHRD’s own document *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* (MHRD, 2014) identifies early grade

reading and writing as foundational to school-based learning – and therefore, as very important contributors to overall learning levels and outcomes. This document has detailed a set of recommendations (system-level, and school-classroom level) that it believes the country needs to adopt. A few of these are:

- Clarity on medium of instruction. It recommends providing the space for children’s home languages at least for the first 2-3 years of formal school instruction
- 2.5 hours per day (500 hours per year) mandated for early reading, writing and language
- Emphasis on teaching reading and writing with understanding (comprehension)
- Development and use of appropriate materials, including children’s literature
- Capacity building of teachers, administrators, etc. on understanding the process of learning to read and write and how best to support it – in terms of curriculum, assessment, responsive re-teaching, material development, and so on.

CARE-India and the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (Ambedkar University, Delhi) have released a Position Paper on Early Language and Literacy Instruction (CECED, 2016), which considers the foundational role played by early language and literacy in all school-based learning. Since much of children’s encounters with language in schools have a textual component to it, it suggests that issues related to early literacy deserve a unique space of their own that are not addressed by generic policies around language.

The ELLI position paper provides various recommendations for early literacy instruction that could easily be translated into policy recommendations. Several of these overlap with the recommendations of the document *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat*, but in addition, it suggests that the 3-8 age-group be viewed as a continuous period of learning, such that pre-primary and primary programmes be planned in tandem. It also outlines a variety of principles that must be adopted in the early grade classrooms for supporting reading and writing. None of these currently available documents have been considered in drafting the DNEP – a significant omission. We must address early

literacy explicitly in a national policy on education, and must do so without further delay.

References

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