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NEP's mandatory age criterion of 6 years for admission into Class 1, a welcome move

India's education system is changing with the implementation of the New Education Policy, including a new age criterion for Grade 1 admission.



National Education Policy 2020

Till date, children were admitted to Grade 1 at the age of five or six, depending on their birth dates; different states across the country too had different cut-off dates for enrolment[File]

India's education system is witnessing a significant transformation with the implementation of the New Education Policy (NEP) introduced in 2020. Among the notable reforms is the revision of the age criterion for admission into Grade 1, which now stipulates that children should be six years old when joining Grade 1.

Till date, children were admitted to Grade 1 at the age of five or six, depending on their birth dates; different states across the country too had different cut-off dates for enrolment. However, the NEP now mandates that children must be six years old by a specific cut-off date to be eligible for admission into Class 1. This shift has been introduced to align with global standards and ensure a smoother academic journey for students.

In a culture that has always prided itself in hurrying its young into formal education at the earliest possible age, the move has been met by a fair amount of trepidation by parents who fear that their children will lose one precious year of education.

However, there is much to commend this new age criterion. One only has to look at the example of countries such as Finland (and in fact most of Scandinavia) where children enter Grade 1 at six or seven years of age with outstanding educational outcomes.

Benefits of the new age criterion include:

Neuroscience & Learning:

It is a scientific truth that 90 per cent of a child's brain develops by the age of six. Foundational neural networks in a child's brains relating to socio-emotional learning, numeracy, literacy, art, social regulation, emotional regulation, and understanding of the social construct with peers, all develop by the age of six. Before building these foundational life capacities, their brains are not ready for cognitive growth; they should never be rushed into formal education before this.

Improved Learning Outcomes

The age criteria change aligns with the understanding that children acquire foundational skills and knowledge during their early years. Starting formal education at the age of six provides an additional year for children to develop cognitive, language, and social skills through play-based learning and early childhood education programmes. Research shows that extended period of pre-primary education can positively influence learning outcomes in the long run as children go through a deeper, more mindful, deliberate and slow process of building foundational life capacities.

Reduced Dropout Rates

The revised age criteria for admission into Class 1 aims to prevent premature enrolment, which can lead to higher dropout rates in subsequent years. Children who are not developmentally ready for formal schooling may struggle academically and experience difficulties in keeping up with their peers. By ensuring that students are adequately prepared before entering Class 1, the NEP seeks to mitigate potential academic challenges and reduce dropout rates.

While the revised age criterion brings several advantages, it will also entail some challenges, especially initially. Schools across the country will have to decide how to deal with the transition year and then eventually either start schooling at the age of four rather than three or introduce an additional grade such as upper kindergarten.

Overall, the revised age criteria for admission into Class 1 is a huge opportunity to right the wrongs of past years in early childhood education by aligning with global educational practices and prioritising children's developmental readiness. Not only will it enhance learning outcomes, it will also ensure that our children are prepared adequately for tomorrow. In a future replete with uncertainties – about the nature of learning and of work – investment in foundational life capacities will stand children in good stead through life. In a world where humans and AI must work together, unhurried and deeper early education will give children the skills they need to thrive in the future. An extra year in the formal education system is a small sacrifice for its enormous positive impact on the children's future success.

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The content of this e-book were originally published in



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