

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY-2020: A RIGHT PRESCRIPTION FOR SCHOOL EDUCATION REFORMS AND ITS CHALLENGES AHEAD – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The New Education Policy-2020 (NEP-2020) is approved by Cabinet in last week of July, 2020. It has brought a fundamental change into the existing structure of school education. The present paper throws light on the new curricular and pedagogical structure recommended by NEP-2020. The paper tries to delineate the relevance of this structural change especially the inclusion of pre-primary stage in formal schooling in the contemporary global educational context. The language policy in NEP-2020 has already been criticised by educationists and bureaucrats. The role of language in case of national integration is logically analysed. The functional utility of any policy depends on its successful implementation in the real ground. The challenges this policy may face during its implementation are also highlighted in this paper. It is found that well paid teachers with a higher degree of commitment, ethics and accountability for early child education is a big challenge for NEP-2020.

Keywords: NEP-2020, prescription, School Education reforms, challenges, language policy

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INTRODUCTION

After a long wait, Government of India has announced New Education Policy. The cabinet approved the New Education Policy(mhrd.gov.in/nep-new,2020) on July 29, 2020 with the aim to bring educational

reforms in Indian education system. It would bring fundamental changes in all levels of education. The world is undergoing rapid changes in the knowledge landscape. The society needs skilled manpower in response to the

advancements in information and communication technology and globalisation. The main thrust of the policy is to develop holistic and creative individuals. An attempt has been made to reduce the burden of contents and to retain the 'core essentials'. Emphasis has been given on 'how to learn' instead of 'what to learn'. The New Education Policy has been in making process from the last five years. It was initiated in 2016 in T S R Subramanian Committee and finally under the chairmanship of Dr. K. Kasturirangan (2019), the final draft (Draft, 2019) has been prepared.

If we look back to the genesis of Indian Educational policy, the land mark changes came into existence with several commissions and committees. New Policy on Education (1986) emphasised on universal access and equity. A remarkable progress was achieved in 2009 when elementary education became the Fundamental Rights for children (RTE, 2009). Considering the impact of globalisation and information and communication technology, the knowledge generation, creation and expansion become imperative. Keeping in tune with this expanding knowledge across the world, new thinking about education policy took its way. After nearly seven years of RTE

Act, 2009, in 2016 a report was formulated under the chairmanship of TSR Subramanian. Finally, after extensive work on different aspects of education, in 2019 a draft was released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development which has been prepared by a committee headed by Dr. K. Kasturirangan. The draft was subjected to numerous consultations from different sectors like Teachers, professionals, NGOs, community members and other stakeholders and finally the New Education Policy (NEP-2020) was approved by the Cabinet in 2020.

Many schemes, policies and frameworks have been developed in India to strengthen early childhood education, such as National Early Childhood Care and Education (NECCE) , 2013; the National Early Childhood Care Education Curriculum Framework (2014); and the draft Framework for implementation of Integrated Scheme for school education (Samagra Shiksha). This is the first effort in India to bring pre-primary education under the same umbrella of formal schooling. Considering the importance of age appropriate pre-primary education, the NEP-2020 included first three years schooling into its structural reform.

I. Needs of School Education Reforms

The present status of education system of our country is very frustrating. The learning outcomes of students in schools across the country have shown no sign of improvement and even be deteriorating over time. Muralidharan (2018) reported that 60% of students aged 6 to 14 in India cannot read or write at the second grade level. Annual Status of Education Report revealed the trend of present education in India. The report acknowledged the quality degradation of education in public school. Only 15.4% of youths (age ranges from 14 to 18) can solve financial calculations along with computation of simple interest (ASER, 2017). The productivity of government school system has declined in terms of reading ability and arithmetic ability of children. In 2008, 53.1% students of class V could read the text of class II which went down in 2018 by 42.2 % (ASER, 2018). ASER, 2019 in their survey on 'Early Years' suggests that children's enrolment in pre-schools at the age between 4 and 5 substantially increase their cognitive skills. However, a firm distinctions was noticed in public-private pre-schools' learning outcomes. Children enrolled in Anganwadi have far lower levels of cognitive skills and foundational ability than the children in private LKG and UKG classes. This poor performance

of education system ultimately threatens the aggregate productivity in the economy. The citizens of India thus are denied in full participation in the modernising economy. The existing education system is unable to create sufficient literate population. Over decades, our education system produces functionally illiterate population. What we need at this moment is to strengthen the education system especially at foundation level with adequate knowledge in basic literacy and numeracy. Under this circumstances, the New Education Policy-2020 has emerged with new aspirations and with due emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy. The two remarkable milestones achieved in education namely RTE Act, 2009 and mid-day meal could successfully increase the enrolment of students in schools. But the extent to which the students learn remains a matter of debate. Enrolment for the age group 6 to 14 has been above 96% per year since 2010 (PRATHAM, 2018). However, attendance in primary sections of Government schools varies in different states. In West Bengal, attendance was recorded below 60% which is the lowest rate in India. Maharashtra and Gujarat has shown the highest rate which was 85%. Research revealed that children continue to spend long hours in schools but their

learning trajectories remain relatively flat. When children's learning outcome remains flat, schooling only acts as '*time served*' and not '*skills gained*' (Pritchatt, 2017). The World Development Report (2018) argues that when learning becomes serious issue and learning becomes the highest priority, then efforts can be made to solve the learning crisis. The report recommends three actions to achieve the target of learning, assessing learning outcome; acting on the evidence to make schools work for all learners; and aligning all actors to make the whole system work for learning. The twelfth Five Year Plan identified the primary education as the priority to be reformed immediately

II. Relevance of New Framework

The policy recommends new curricular and pedagogical framework for school education as 5+3+3+4. Total time spent in school education has been extended from 12 years to 15 years. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age group 3 to 5 is included in school education as compulsory. The ECCE is also recognised internationally by all countries and included in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are likely to be achieved by 2030.

The first five years of schooling is considered as foundational stage of

learning. The research shows that 85 per cent of brain development completed prior to the age of 6 years. Appropriate care at early childhood with right curricular inputs helps in developing brain architecture.

Early experiences stimulate brain and ensure healthy brain development and growth. Adverse experiences at the early stage can impair brain architecture with negative effects that may last till adulthood (Harvard University, 2009). Various kind of learning activities at the early stage strengthen the neuron connections which are responsible for communication and information processing. Millions of neuron connections are formed during the early few years of life and the process is reduced with age. Hence the ability of brain to change is faster and with less effort than that of later stage of human life (Fig1).

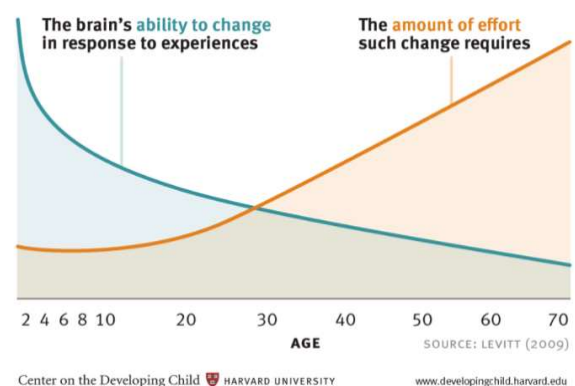


Fig1: Brain Development with Age (Source: Harvard University)

PRATHAM, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) reported that poor

learning outcomes among children in schools (ASER, 2019) is mainly due to over emphasis on content knowledge. The ASER, 2019 highlighted on pre-schooling or schooling status of children in the age group of 4 to 8 years. It is mentioned that developing problem solving faculties and building memory of children need to be nurtured in early years which in turn would enhance cognitive development. It is globally accepted that, the early stages of human life in the age group of 3 to 8 years is the most important period of cognitive, social, language and emotional development. The four important predictors of future success in children are: cognitive development, early language, early numeracy and social and emotional development. Early numeracy skills is essential for everyday life which includes counting, measurement and sense of quantity. NEP-2020, thus, ensures Foundational Literacy and Numeracy for all students by grade 3. This goal is given special attention and priority which is said to be achieved by 2025.

Quality education at early childhood has a crucial impact on development and it is key to subsequent success in school and beyond. But in India many children are deprived of quality early childhood education. Children from socio-

economically disadvantaged background do not get a supportive learning environment. Lack of affordable and accessible pre-schooling in rural settings, parents send children to enter school (class 1) before age 6 without readiness. ASER 2018 study shows that 10% children at the age of 4 and 34% children at the age of 5 enrol in school in rural areas of India. The India Early Childhood Education Impact (Kaul, V., et al, 2017) reported that quite a large number of children in India are exposed to educational environment which are inappropriate to their age. It is also revealed that 28.8% children at the age of 3 and 15.6% children at the age of 4 remain out of pre-primary school (Table 1).

Table 1: Per cent (%) Children Enrolled in Different Types of Pre-

Age	Pre-School			School			Not enrolled	Total
	Anganwadi	Govt. pre-primary	Private LKG/UKG	Govt	Private	Other		
Age 3	57.1	1.0	10.0	2.0	1.0	0.1	28.8	100
Age 4	50.5	2.1	23.4	5.3	3.0	0.2	15.6	100
Age 5	28.1	2.8	27.5	23.3	9.8	0.3	8.1	100
Age 6	7.6	1.9	16.4	49.5	20.7	0.5	3.3	100
Age 7	1.8	0.8	7.3	59.1	28.7	0.6	1.8	100
Age 8	0.7	0.4	3.3	62.6	30.8	0.7	1.5	100

schools and Schools by Age 2018

(Source: ASER, 2018)

This is because the education is not the highest priority in government pre-schooling centres like Anganwadi and ICDS which mainly focus on health care and nutrition and childhood education is an additional activity for those agencies. Consequently, a large number of children enter into the formal schooling without readiness. Considering this severe learning crisis going on in India, the NEP-2020 has given due emphasis on proper care and education for early childhood.

Table 2: The IECEI Report on School Readiness in Three States (Telengana, Assam , Rajasthan)

Concepts and Skills in Different Areas	Ability of Children
Language	10.7% (Could identify all sounds and pictures beginning with same sound)
Cognitive	17.5% (Could complete patterns)
Numerical	29.5% (Could do number comparison accurately)

A significant attempt has been made in NEP-2020 to offer same pattern of early childhood curriculum specially designed for children upto 8 years. Therefore, the inclusion of early 3 (3+2) years in formal school structure is the right step. It will also control the mushrooming growth of substandard private pre-primary schools. National Curricular and Pedagogical

Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) would be framed by MHRD. However, the extent to which this centralised approach would meet the diversified needs of children spread in different geographical locations is a serious issue. Curriculum experts suggest that involvement of state and local community increase the relevance and usefulness of curriculum. Another significant aspect recommended by NEP-2020 is to provide quality and developmentally appropriate education for all children. Thus, it strengthens the public schools in terms of literacy and arithmetic. In between 2008 and 2018, the arithmetic ability of class 5 children from government schools who can do division went down (Table-3) from 34% from 22.7% (Chavan, 2018).

Table 3: Per Cent (%) Children of Std. 5 in Government and Private Schools who can do division.

(Source: ASER, 2018)

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Govt. School	34.4	33.9	20.3	20.7	21.1	22.7
Private School	47.1	42.2	37.8	39.3	38.0	39.8

Research revealed that in rural India, students are far below from grade appropriate standards. Children in same

age group and in same grade showed variations. For example, in Std 3, some students are at Std 2 level, some are at Std 1 level and some are even at pre-primary level in terms of their reading and arithmetic skills. This variation is one of the most critical constraints in the structure of Indian education system (Muralidharan, 2018). Banerjee & Daflo (2012) stated that the teaching-learning approach in India mainly focus on top level students in the class. NEP-2020 envisions a high quality education for all. Children from early stage must gain knowledge in literacy and numeracy. Achieving foundational literacy and numeracy by all children by grade 3 is the right prescription.

The first three years of learning is considered as foundational stage for children which will be play and activity based. Children are generally inclined towards play and story. This can be used as pedagogical tools at the early stage (Sarkar, 1982).

Effective learning occurs when teaching is infused with fun and joy (Bhowmik, 2016). Free play and guided play with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolding are most effective for achieving positive learning outcomes with pre-schoolers (Bhowmik, 2017; Fischer et

al., 2011). The middle stage comprising of Grade III, IV and V are the preparatory stage. At this stage, children would be prepared for dealing with the real or concrete worlds and experiences with logical thinking (Veeraraghavan, 2019). However, NEP at this stage suggests abstract and deductive thinking. Piaget defined this period as Concrete Operational Stage. At this stage, development is affected by learning and training. NEP-2020, therefore, recommends at this stage the introduction of various subjects in an integrated manner. Experiential learning and exploration are marked as main pedagogical approach.

The main thrust of curricular and pedagogical reforms in NEP-2020 is holistic development of learners. Learners' physical, mental, emotional, social, moral and spiritual development would be taken into consideration.

III. Language :A Controversial Component of NEP-2020

NEP-2020 advocates three language policy from Grade 3 and the three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to

India. Acquisition of more than one languages (bilingual or multilingual) is the natural potential for normal human being. This is only due to lack of environmental stimuli which may fail to provide the opportunity to learn another language. Sufficient evidences are there to believe this proposition. The inclusion of more than one languages in the curriculum from preparatory stage is the right prescription to facilitate cognitive development among students. Cook (2002) argued that when appropriate environment is given, two languages are as normal as 'two lungs'. Chomsky (1959) in his famous 'Innateness Theory' claimed that children must have an inborn, natural faculty for language acquisition which he called Language Acquisition Device (LAD). LAD contains specific knowledge about language. Human brain has neural circuit for language learning since birth. This disposition is related to acquisition of native language or mother tongue. Language other than native language learned in a formal setting through planned and regular instruction in school require high level of cognition. The right environmental stimulation in the form of appropriate curricular inputs and interaction are prerequisite to learn second or third language. Jean Piaget(1896-1980)

the Swiss cognitive psychologist claimed that language is just one aspects of a students' overall intellectual development. He further argued that a child has to understand a concept before he or she can acquire the particular language. Language acquisition is explained within the context of the child's broader intellectual development. Again, Jerome Bruner (1966, 68) stressed the importance of social interaction language learning. Language inputs children receive from surroundings and put in practice for communication strengthen the language acquisition. Therefore, provision must be made to fulfill the above criteria for acquisition of multilanguage, otherwise three languages would be a burden for children especially for the children of under privileged section.

Language is the means to express oneself. Also, language is one of the means for psychic exploitation which ultimately leads to cultural exploitation and economic exploitation. Hence, language policy should be framed carefully for national integration. Each and every language must be treated equally in a country like India and measures should be taken to preserve and promote all languages of the country. Since mother tongue is the only language through which one can express himself /

herself fully, education should be imparted in mother tongue or in students' natural language (which s/he can understand and speak fluently) only. Hence, the mother tongue should be taught throughout the school levels. Being a part of global citizen, students should also learn a global language as '*lingua franca*' which is 'English' at present time.

Language cannot be isolated from culture, because every language is the repository of values, beliefs, images and memories. Sanskrit is the mother of majority of Indian languages (Sarkar, P.R., 1983). Hence, Sanskrit should not be treated as a language of a religious community. Sanskrit should be learned compulsorily to understand the ancient culture and this will also enrich other Indian languages of Sanskrit-origin. Knowledge spread in various Sanskrit books on science, medicine, law etc. will help to broaden the modern knowledge-base ('Sanskrit Knowledge Systems' as mentioned in NEP-2020).

Though Sanskrit should be taught at all the levels of school education, in the foundation stage it should be restricted only to recitation of Sanskrit slokas and not as a language *per se*. In order to avoid conflict and misunderstanding about three

language formula, the following would have been more appropriate :

I. Mother tongue or students' natural language (which he /she can understand and speak fluently)

II. Sanskrit and

III. English as *lingua franca*.

All other languages be it native or foreign should be made available to students as optional subject as per their individual choice.

IV. Strengthening and Expansion of Early Child Care Programme: A big Challenge

The curriculum of early childhood education needs to be reconstructed. The Economist Intelligence Unit Survey (2012) has reported that the ECCE programme of India lags far behind in terms of quality. It ranked last among 45 countries. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) of India covers the largest network in the world however; it lacks the quality of the service delivery. Now, ECCE has become the part of Foundational stage of school curriculum which will include both pre- primary and first two years of primary stage. Hence, the curriculum must be strengthened for cognitive as well as the socio-emotional development of children. Play and discovery learning both are the

means of transacting curriculum at this stage. ECCE curriculum needs to be reframed in the way that each child gets the opportunity to utilise his/her full potential. Government must ensure early childhood programme that caters to the needs of the children and where the 3-H (head, heart and hand) are fully developed. The policy will be *no child leaving behind* which is a big challenge for the diverse country like India. Expansion of quality pre primary education at the furthest corner of the country especially in the remote areas is a big challenge. Another significant issue is the capacity building of the teachers for early childhood education. Teacher should be aware that their professional role has a significant impact on children's growth and development. Teacher will create a fear free and joyful learning environment by their own conduct. The growth in emotional health are the pre requisite of primary teachers. Investment in the quality pre school teachers preparation is the need of the hour for India.

V. Implementation of NEP-2020: Major Issues and Challenges

Success of any theory or policy depends on its implementation in real ground. NEP-2020 envisions new form of education to

enhance the quality of human life. NEP-2020 seems to be progressive and child friendly. Many good elements are incorporated into this policy but the extent to which it would bring the desired changes will depend on its implementation. It is not enough to ensure that children would attend pre-school but also to ensure that this would provide right environment where children can grow and thrive (Bhattacharji & Ramanujan, 2018). Fear-free and psychologically enabling environments are essential for holistic growth of children. It requires coordination among central and state governments along with their various structures on ground. It is important to consider different context which is different in geographical areas. So 'one size fits all' strategy will not work for young children. Equity and quality in terms of learning outcomes depend on various factors like: school environment, teacher, curriculum which seem to be a big challenge for our country. Too much emphasis on nationalism may hamper the universal outlook which is also one of the ultimate goals of NEP-2020. It is teacher who adds life to any curriculum. Teachers' role is vital in achieving the goals of curriculum. Teachers' capacity building

through proper training is crucial in this regard.

By 2021, a new and comprehensive National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, NCFTE 2021, will be formulated by the NCTE (National Council for Teacher Education) in consultation with NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and

Training), based on the principles of this National Education Policy 2020. Teachers' preparation for early childhood care and education demands special attention. While preparing curricula for early childhood teachers' training, aspects like child psychology and its application, patience, motherly love and affections and insights should be considered as essential ingredients.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that India is facing a severe learning crisis and this is because the early childhood education is neglected in our country. Children enrolled in primary schools are unable to do basic skills such as foundational numeracy and literacy. There is a strong relationship found between exposures to early education and better performance in school at later stages. Studies have also shown that children who attend the pre- primary

school have much higher retention rate.

The early child education prepares the children for school and build a foundation for lifelong learning. Therefore, inclusion of pre- primary education in pedagogical and curricular structure of formal schooling is the right attempt to achieve the Sustainable Goals (SDGs).

Unity in diversity is the hallmarks of India. The country is proudly holding the different language, religion and culture together to frame an indivisible human society. Language should not be the cause of discrimination in any way. Therefore, selection should be in such a way that must not hurt the sentiment of any community.

NEP-2020 seems to be a progressive education policy but it would face enormous challenges during its implementation in terms of physical infrastructure, human resources and raising fund. It is worthy to mention that in a diverse country like India, unless pre-school programme and quality child care reach every corner of India, the ultimate goal of NEP-2020 will not be achieved. Preparing skilled teacher would be another serious issue related to its successful implementation. Too much emphasis on ICT may result in digital divide which has already been prominent during this

COVID 19 pandemic. Finally, the successful implementation of NEP-2020 would require the central-state collaboration and positive intention.

CompetingInterests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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