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## **From Policy to Practice: A Critical Analysis of NEP 2020 and Its Implications for Schooling**

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### **Abstract**

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) introduces a transformative framework aimed at restructuring India's school education system to align with global standards while preserving cultural values. The transition from the traditional 10+2 school structure to a 5+3+3+4 which highlights the crucial significance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in promoting the growth and development of young children. This new design emphasizes the importance of establishing a strong foundation for future learning and overall well-being. Additionally, it identifies Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as essential components that serve as the basis for lifelong learning. The policy emphasizes learner-centred pedagogies, multidisciplinary curriculum reforms, inclusive education practices, the integration of digital technologies, and a strong focus on the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers. Furthermore, it advocates for competency-based assessments that move beyond rote learning towards critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. By promoting equity, accessibility, and holistic development, NEP 2020 envisions an education system that prepares learners for the challenges of the 21st century while contributing to India's socio-economic growth.

**Keywords:** *NEP-2020, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, implementation.*

## Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic and cultural development of any nation. In the Indian context, it has historically been considered a vital tool for social transformation, equity, and national progress (Tilak, 2020). Recognizing the need for an education system aligned with the demands of the 21st century, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, replacing the earlier policy formulated in 1986 and revised in 1992. The NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for reforming both school and higher education, with a strong emphasis on equity, inclusivity, quality, and accessibility (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). It marks a paradigm shift from the traditional 10+2 model to a 5+3+3+4 structure, thereby integrating early childhood education into the formal schooling system. This structural change is designed to ensure that learners develop strong foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills at an early stage, which are essential for lifelong learning and holistic development (Kaushik, 2021).

The policy further emphasizes curriculum and pedagogy reforms, encouraging a shift away from rote memorization toward critical

thinking, creativity, and experiential learning. Additionally, it advocates for the use of digital technology, multilingualism, and competency-based assessment systems to enhance learner engagement and outcomes (Kumar & Rani, 2021). A strong focus is also placed on teacher capacity building and continuous professional development (CPD), recognizing teachers as the cornerstone of effective educational transformation (Sharma, 2021). By addressing issues of equity, inclusivity, and accessibility, NEP 2020 envisions creating a robust education system that prepares learners for the challenges of a rapidly evolving, globally connected world while retaining India's cultural and ethical foundations.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 charts a vision to overhaul India's education system. It is explicitly the first education policy of the 21st century, aiming to "revamp all aspects of the education structure" – from early childhood to higher education – to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century (NEP, 2020). Its key goals include *universal access* (preschool through secondary), *inclusivity*, *quality learning*, and *accountability* (NEP, 2020, NIPUN). For example, the policy aims to achieve a 100%

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the school level by 2030 (NEP, 2020) and envisions bringing millions of out-of-school children into formal education (NEP, 2020). Under NEP 2020, classroom pedagogy will shift from rote learning to critical thinking and problem-solving, promoting student-centred and experiential methods (NEP, 2020). In summary, NEP 2020 outlines an ambitious, multifaceted framework to make Indian education more equitable, holistic, and future-ready.

1. Major features (School Education): New 5+3+3+4 structure (ages 3–18) (NEP, 2020); focus on *Foundational Literacy and Numeracy* (FLN) by Grade 3 (NIPUN BHARAT); mother-tongue instruction at least up to Grade 5; removal of rigid academic/vocational stream divisions (NEP, 2020); introduction of school-based assessments and a National Assessment Centre (MoE, 2025; PARAKH); and emphasis on technology (National Educational Technology Forum) (NEP, 2020).

### **New School Structure and Early Childhood (ECCE)**

NEP 2020 restructures the old 10+2 system into a 5+3+3+4 model, aligned with child development stages (NEP, 2020). The

*Foundational Stage* covers ages 3–8 (3 years preschool/Anganwadi + Grades 1–2), the *Preparatory Stage* ages 8–11 (Grades 3–5), the *Middle Stage* ages 11–14 (Grades 6–8), and the *Secondary Stage* ages 14–18 (Grades 9–12) (NEP, 2020). Importantly, the NEP formally integrates Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) into the schooling system. It recognizes ages 0–8 as a "crucial window" for brain development, mandating a play- and activity-based curriculum in the Foundational Stage (NEP, 2020). This aligns with UNESCO's view that quality ECCE is foundational for lifelong learning and holistic development (UNESCO). The policy also aims to train many more ECCE teachers (e.g. Anganwadi workers) in modern early-childhood pedagogy and psychology, ensuring a smooth transition from play-based preschool into formal Grades 1–2.

1. Holistic ECCE curriculum: Activity/play-based learning in preschools; integration of arts, physical activity, storytelling, and multi-sensory methods (NEP, 2020; UNESCO).
2. Grade 1–2 transition: Foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3 (via *NIPUN Bharat* mission) (NIPUN

BHARAT); focus on language, math, creativity and critical thinking.

### **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**

NEP 2020 elevates Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as the highest priority. Citing NEP 2020 and subsequent initiatives, the *NIPUN Bharat* mission commits to ensuring that every child (ages 3–9) attains basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills by 2025. This responds to evidence that deficits in early literacy/numeracy severely hinder later learning; UNESCO reports that children who lack FLN in early grades struggle academically in higher grades. The policy mandates state-level implementation plans with clear targets and regular monitoring to achieve "universal foundational literacy and numeracy" (NIPUN BHARAT).

1. **Key actions:** Intensive reading and math programs in Grades 1–3; continuous assessments of FLN; use of local languages/mother tongue in initial literacy (NEP, 2020).
2. **Expected outcomes:** By bolstering FLN, NEP aims to close early learning gaps, reduce dropouts, and raise the overall quality of schooling. (For example, National ASER surveys have shown only

~50% of Grade 3 children reached age-appropriate reading levels, highlighting the need for such interventions.)

### **Curriculum, Pedagogy and Multidisciplinary Learning**

NEP 2020 calls for deep reforms in curriculum and teaching methods. The core idea is a shift from rote memorization to *competency-based, experiential, and holistic* learning (NEP, 2020). Curricula will emphasize conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and real-world application, thereby reducing content overload to facilitate a deeper exploration of key ideas (NEP, 2020). NEP also mandates *integration* of subjects (blurring lines between arts, sciences, vocational training, etc.), promoting *multilingual* education and project-based learning. In practice, this means:

1. **Reduced curriculum burden:** Focus on core concepts and skills rather than rote facts (NEP, 2020). Classrooms are to be "more interactive, joyful and collaborative," with activities, experiments and field trips supplementing textbooks.
2. **No rigid streams:** At the secondary level, streams are made flexible. Students can choose a mix of arts,

- science, humanities or vocational subjects, and multiple entry/exit options are introduced (e.g. certificate/diploma after grades 10/11) (NEP, 2020).
3. **Multilingual emphasis:** NEP prescribes instruction "in the home language/mother tongue" at least up to Grade 5 (preferably Grade 8) (NEP, 2020). This aligns with UNESCO research, which shows that pupils taught in their mother tongue learn more effectively – they are significantly more likely to achieve age-appropriate reading skills (UNESCO). All schools must teach multiple languages, including regional and classical languages, to foster multilingual fluency.
  4. Traditional Indian knowledge (e.g. classical sciences, arts, yoga, environmental awareness) will be integrated into the curriculum, instilling cultural pride and broader perspectives.

Overall, NEP's curriculum reforms aim to produce well-rounded learners – ethical, creative, and adaptable – who are ready for a rapidly changing world.

### **Examination and Assessment Reforms**

NEP 2020 envisions moving away from high-stakes exams toward continuous, skill-based assessments. Key reforms include:

1. **School-based Continuous Assessment:** Regular *formative* evaluations (SBA) across all elementary schools to track each child's learning and provide timely feedback (MoE, 2025). The government's Samagra Shiksha framework describes SBA as a decentralized evaluation that empowers teachers to improve student learning (MoE, 2025). It encourages portfolios, self-assessment, and peer assessment, as well as the monitoring of *both* cognitive and socio-emotional skills (MoE, 2025).
2. **New National Assessment Centre (PARAKH):** NEP proposes PARAKH ("Performance, Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development") as an independent body to set standards and guidelines for student assessment across all school boards. PARAKH will advise on best practices and help all boards shift toward 21st-century competencies (NEP, 2020).
3. **Board exam flexibility:** Boards (10th/12th) will offer modular and choice-based exams. Students can take board exams twice a year to improve scores. The focus will be on conceptual understanding and application, rather than rote recall (NEP, 2020). Over time,

secondary results will include holistic report cards that reflect projects, portfolios, and extracurricular achievements.

These reforms aim to reduce exam stress and foster a deeper understanding of subjects, while maintaining accountability. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring report (2021) similarly underscores that diversified assessments and reduced emphasis on one-time exams can improve learning outcomes across student groups.

### **Inclusion, Equity and Multilingual Education**

NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on equity and inclusion:

1. Universal access: The policy's target of 100% GER and bringing out-of-school children into education (via open schooling, etc.) reflects a commitment to universalizing education. It explicitly focuses on locating and enrolling all children (including girl children, disadvantaged and tribal groups) into schools.
2. Special provisions: The NEP creates Special Education Zones (SEZs) in districts with large disadvantaged populations (e.g., tribal, minority, or rural areas) (NEP, 2020). These zones

receive additional funding and infrastructure (e.g., inclusive classrooms, language support, scholarships) to enhance access.

3. Gender equity: A dedicated Gender Inclusion Fund is proposed to support girls' students (especially in higher grades and STEM fields), providing scholarships, safe transportation, and sanitary facilities (NEP, 2020). This aligns with UNESCO's call for system-wide gender equity in education (for instance, UNESCO notes that girls still account for a disproportionate share of out-of-school youth and adult illiteracy) (UNESCO).
4. Children with disabilities: NEP mandates that all schools become inclusive. They must provide learning accommodations (assistive technologies, digital content, sign language support), barrier-free infrastructure and training for special educators. A *barrier-free* curriculum design will be implemented, allowing children with disabilities to learn alongside their peers.

Multilingual education is a cross-cutting equity strategy. By using children's mother tongues early on, NEP aims to improve understanding and retention. UNESCO



research confirms that mother-tongue instruction boosts learning, especially for vulnerable groups (NEP, 2020). NEP therefore encourages schools to teach in regional languages (at least up to Grade 5), while also gradually introducing other Indian and foreign languages.

### **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

A reformed education system requires empowered teachers. NEP 2020 mandates robust continuous professional development (CPD):

1. 50 hours of CPD per year: Every teacher must undertake at least 50 hours of professional development annually (Pathak and Patel, 2021; Sahoo, 2024). Training modules will cover new areas emphasized by the NEP – such as foundational literacy/numeracy methods, formative assessment, competency-based pedagogy, and the integration of arts/sports into learning (Sahoo, 2024). School and district resource centres will facilitate workshops, peer groups and e-learning for teachers.
2. Teacher education overhaul: Teacher training curricula will be updated with a competency-based framework (reflecting NEP's multidisciplinary aims). By 2030,

the minimum qualification will be a 4-year integrated B.Ed. Mentoring programs (e.g. by retired educators) will support in-service teachers.

3. National Professional Standards: The NEP calls for national career and appraisal standards for teachers (NPST), aligning promotions with performance and CPD participation (Sahoo, 2024). These reforms aim to make teaching a more dynamic profession and to keep educators abreast of modern pedagogy.

Research indicates that effective CPD and reflective teaching are among the most significant factors influencing student achievement. Thus, NEP's push for ongoing teacher learning and collaboration (e.g. school-based "quality circles" of teachers) is expected to raise classroom quality over time.

### **Technology and Digital Learning**

In the digital era, NEP 2020 highlights education technology as a means to bridge gaps and innovate learning. Key initiatives include:

1. National EdTech Forum (NETF): An independent body to facilitate dialogue on using technology in education (software, hardware, pedagogy) and to



- guide policymakers and teachers (NEP, 2020).
2. Digital content platforms: The policy envisions scaling up existing e-learning platforms (such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM) and creating question banks, virtual labs, and open repositories. These will support blended learning in both urban and remote schools. NEP explicitly encourages public-private partnerships to develop quality digital education resources.
  3. Equity through tech: Digital classrooms, broadcast lessons and mobile apps (accelerated during COVID-19) aim to improve reach in underserved areas. For example, NEP's recommendations include using digital infrastructure to connect rural schools and train teachers online.

Overall, NEP 2020 sees technology as a tool to personalize learning and offer 21st-century skills (coding, AI literacy) to students. This aligns with global trends: the World Bank and UNESCO note that thoughtful EdTech integration can expand access and foster engagement, provided it is coupled with teacher training and infrastructure support.

### **Investment and Implementation**

The success of NEP hinges on adequate funding and collaboration. The policy calls for gradually increasing India's education spending to 6% of GDP (from the current ~3% level) (NEP, 2020). Increased budgetary support would enhance infrastructure (libraries, labs, ICT), enable the hiring of more teachers, and expand new programs.

NEP also encourages public-private partnerships (PPP) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions to accelerate reform. For instance, private and nonprofit entities may partner to establish new schools, vocational training centers, EdTech initiatives, or teacher development programs. The government views PPPs and CSR as avenues to leverage additional investment and innovation in areas such as teacher training, digital content, and school infrastructure.

However, experts note challenges: uneven implementation across states, funding gaps, and the need for systemic capacity building. UNESCO and OECD observers caution that NEP's ambitious reforms will require careful planning, sustained political will, and ongoing assessment to ensure they translate

into improved learning outcomes on the ground.

### Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a transformative vision for Indian school education, aiming to cultivate critical thinkers, creativity and inclusivity. Its strengths include a student-center approach, universal foundational skills, and integration of Indian languages and knowledge traditions. If fully implemented – with sustained funding, effective teacher training, and technology integration – NEP could position India as a global leader in education. As one review notes, the policy's success will depend on "bringing the unreached into the fold" and making learning truly enjoyable and meaningful for all children (NEP, 2020; UNESCO). Continuous monitoring (via NIPUN Bharat, ASER surveys, PARAKH) will be vital to steer progress. In the words of the policy itself, the goal is an education system "second to none" by 2040 (NEP, 2020) – an aspiration that, if realized, would reshape India's future.

**Key Takeaways:** NEP 2020 restructures school education (5+3+3+4 stages) and integrates quality ECCE; prioritizes universal literacy and numeracy; revamps curriculum for critical thinking; introduces

ongoing, holistic assessments (PARAKH/SBA); mandates mother-tongue instruction and inclusive practices; requires 50+ hours/year teacher training; and promotes tech-enabled learning and higher public investment (NEP, 2020; Sahoo, 2024). All these reforms, grounded in global evidence (e.g., UNESCO), aim to modernize India's schooling and prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

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