ISSN- 2349-7076

EduInspire-An International E-Journal
An International Peer Reviewed and Referred Journal (www.ctegujarat.org)
Council for Teacher Education Foundation (CTEF, Gujarat Chapter)
Patron: Prof. R. G. Kothari
Chief Editor: Prof. Jignesh B. Patel
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EduInspire

- An International Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Vol: XIII
Issue: I
January-2026

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A Shift in Early Childhood Education: Traditional to Competency Based Learning

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 emphasizes fostering creativity, supporting innovation, and encouraging entrepreneurship. The policy document states that competency-based learning (CBL) and education must become the norm in classroom interactions. This article discusses competency-based education through a qualitative policy review, the creation of a competency-based education system for foundational years, its unique characteristics, and the challenges in implementing it. It effectively demonstrates what competency-based education is, as per the recent major policy documents in the Indian context. It elaborates how this approach benefits the learner by providing corrective teaching, practical knowledge, and more practice time.

Keywords: Competency-Based Learning, Experiential Pedagogy, NEP 2020, ECCE, Foundational Education, Education Policy.

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECCE) is one of the most critical and effective investments a country can make in its people. Unanimously researches that giving them top-notch care and education during early years yield lifelong outcomes (Rahaman et al., 2024; Chandra et al., 2017; Chandra, R. 2024) and can serve as a tool in nation development. Since, the release of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, there has been a shift in the entire approach towards educating young children, especially in foundational years (Meher & Meher, 2024). With the launch of three major policy-level documents i.e. NEP 2020, National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat Guidelines, 2021), and National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCFFS,

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2022), the focus has been made on goal and competency-based education at all stages from traditional, content heavy and teacher led educational model.

Before making further discussion, it is essential to understand the definitional meaning of the terms goal and competency in the given context. Curricular goals – These are statements that give directions to curriculum development and implementation (NCFFS, 2022). Goals define the overall outline and direction to be designed for attaining the desired education. (Spady, 1977) defines CBL as a "Data-based, adaptive, performance-oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record and certify within the context of flexible time parameters the demonstration of known, explicitly stated, and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect successful functioning in life roles". In a simpler way, competency is one's ability to complete a task using their own capabilities learned through a process. Hence, the focus of competency-based learning is on acquiring the skill over the content. It should be process-based and student-cantered focusing on enhancing the problem-solving and critical-thinking skills of children from the preschool level itself (NIPUN Bharat guidelines, 2021, Henri et al., 2017, Catacutan et al.,2023).

Competency-based learning (CBL) will be a transformative initiative in making India well-prepared for the upcoming challenges of the modern world. Gone are the days when school education was copying from the blackboard and reproducing the same in the exam papers. It is important that we provide children with experiences that provide the opportunity to think critically and question the facts. Knowledge has to be combined with the adequate skill to put it to use. This will lead to upcoming generations which will be innovators, creators, and problem solvers. Hence, classroom transactions will shift towards competency-based learning and education to achieve the minimum expected learning levels. In countries where children attain skill-based education since the beginning, the likelihood to complete higher education and better employment has been seen.

However, the implementation models to Indian context are yet in developing stage as CBL is recently introduced by NEP 2020. Competency based programs require robust teacher preparation, appropriate teacher student ration and learning material rich environment. And these conditions sometimes remain uneven across various states across India. Hence, institutional capacities needed to make CBL uniformly practiced as policy recommendations.

Conceptually, the shift is compelling and advocated of CBL argue that it will develop more creative thinkers and adaptive practice-based learners. But, as the variation in infrastructure and workforce varies very vastly, CBL seems ambitious to achieve and is only possible with changes at systematic level. The contemporary discourse, therefore requires a more critical

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evaluation of how competency-based expectations intersect with ground realities, institutional affordability and lived experiences of teachers and young children.

Goals and Competencies prescribed as per National Documents

NEP 2020 broadly suggests the aim of a comprehensive education for mankind and states goals of education. These aims served as the inspiration for this NCF's curriculum goals, along withother pertinent factors. Following that, the competencies have been derived from these Curricular Goals and the learning outcomes from those competencies. The Competencies and the Learning Outcomes are developmental, just like the Curricular Goals. All learning outcomes follow a developmental trajectory through each stage, spanning all age groups. Instead of being precise age-specific objectives, they must be viewed as a continuum and a trajectory. The clear flow-down that must exist from educational goals to curricula goals to competencies to learning outcomes is highly stressed by this NCF.

While the NCF helped to give a narrowed breakdown from braod educational goals to achievable objectives, this highly structured way of learning introduces a potential paradox. On one hand, it prvides a roadmap for accountability, it creates a risk for mechanization of foundational stage. The challenge lies in implementation where integration is kept at as key indicator and measurable milestone serve as indicators to holistic development.

One of the earliest descriptions of the various facets of human evolution is found in the Taittiriya Upanishad's Panchakosha. Along with the more recent understanding that has been developed via research in developmental biology, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, these definitions are still valid. The five “Koshas” has been kept at the center to derive the five domains of development namely, physical, socio-emotional and ethical, cognitive, language, and aesthetic development. Under them 13 curricular goals have been identified having 68 competencies to be achieved through defined learning outcomes.

However, a critical valuation reveals a potential epistemological disconnect. Amalgamating ancient philosophical constructs with the empirical requirements of modern development biology and neuroscience is intellectually ambitious yet practically difficult. Also, seeing goals and competencies as a continuum rather than age specific benchmarks may create a paradox. The sheer volume of measurable outcomes may pressurize the teacher and create a feeling of overwhelm to teach to achieve rather spontaneous learning.

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Likewise, NIPUN Bharat emphasized on holistic development of children and encompasses all kinds of learning under three major goals which are children maintain good health and well- being, and lastly, children become effective communicators and children become involved learners and connect with their immediate environment. The developmental goals have been further divided into six levels corresponding to the 3 years of preschool followed by 3 years of schooling. There isa strong linkage between goals, competency, and learning outcomes to be achieved. In a way learning outcome is a measurable statement for a given competency.

Thankfully to avoid any kind of confusion and not waste the efforts of a yearlong exercise of various states in executing NIPUN Bharata Guidelines, to a certain extent the NCFFS has already mapped the NIPUN Bharat goals and competencies with its own. It is advised that the learning outcomes be mapped in the same manner with the utmost understanding and care so that the material already developed can be used. Although mapping may seem helpful at administrative level, there is still a sense of burdening the teachers with multiple policy document at the same time.

Major Characteristics of Competency-Based Education

The main goal of CBE is often articulated as enabling learners to demonstrate understanding through meaningful application rather than the mere acquisition of content. However, this emphasis assumes that classroom practices consistently move beyond transmission-based teaching, an assumption that does not always hold in practice. Although thinking, imagining, and interpreting are positioned as central to CBE, the extent to which curricula genuinely incorporate learners' lived experiences remains uneven. In areas such as reading and writing, learning risks becoming superficial when students are unable to connect academic material to their own contexts. While schools are expected to foster environments that help learners recognize links between concepts, skills, and real-life experiences, such integration is frequently constrained by rigid curricular structures and outcome-driven mandates.

CBE is commonly described as a holistic approach that integrates knowledge with skills, attitudes, and values. While theoretically compelling, its implementation in the early years raises important concerns regarding feasibility and teacher preparedness. Although CBE claims to promote life skills, socio-emotional competencies, and decision-making abilities, these domains are complex and not easily captured within standardized competency frameworks. The emphasis on identifying individual strengths, needs, interests, and

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preferences presupposes a level of individualized instruction that may be difficult to achieve in resource-limited or large-classroom settings. Moreover, the requirement that children demonstrate mastery before progressing to subsequent levels, while intended to ensure learning quality, risks overlooking developmental variability and the non-linear nature of early learning. Similarly, the reliance on measurable and objective benchmarks may lead to the oversimplification of multifaceted competencies.

The shift towards CBE is also accompanied by changes in assessment practices, particularly the move from summative to formative assessment. While formative assessment is intended to capture children's skills and understanding in applied contexts, it often remains loosely defined, creating challenges related to consistency and reliability. Although CBE seeks to broaden assessment beyond content knowledge to include skills and learner dispositions, such assessments may inadvertently become checklist-oriented, undermining their formative intent. Furthermore, positioning assessment as a diagnostic tool for teachers rather than an evaluative mechanism for children is conceptually sound, yet it demands sustained professional support and reflective capacity that are not always institutionally ensured.

Finally, CBE emphasizes the involvement of multiple stakeholders alongside teachers to create a comprehensive support system for learners. While stakeholder alignment is presented as a strength, it assumes shared understanding, coherence, and capacity across families, schools, and systems. In diverse socio-cultural contexts, this assumption may not hold, and without clear communication and role clarity, stakeholder involvement may introduce inconsistencies rather than providing the intended continuity and support for children's learning.

Implementation of Competency-Based Education

NEP 2020 proposes multiple pathways for the transmission of knowledge, skills, and capabilities, emphasizing the integration of arts, sports, play, and hands-on learning experiences. While this approach foregrounds experiential and activity-based pedagogy, its practical realization raises questions about coherence and consistency across classrooms. The emphasis on indigenous toys and culturally rooted materials aims to connect children with Indian values, ethics, and traditions; however, the extent to which such resources are meaningfully integrated into everyday pedagogical practices varies considerably. Although NEP 2020 advocates a shift from subject-centric instruction to a focus on the holistic development of the child across multiple developmental domains, this broad vision risks

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remaining aspirational without clear guidance on balancing curricular depth with developmental breadth.

(NCFFS, 2022) adopts a holistic stance by responding to contextual and systemic specificities within the Indian education system. Developed through a nationwide consultative process initiated by the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Framework seeks to clarify both curricular content and pedagogical approaches for early learners. While this participatory process lends legitimacy to the Framework, translating its broad principles into classroom-level practice poses significant challenges, particularly in systems marked by disparities in infrastructure, teacher capacity, and regional resources.

Gupta, 2020 proposes a five-step process for developing a competency-based curriculum, originally intended for adult learners, which is often cited as adaptable to the early years. This model involves identifying future-oriented competencies, deconstructing them into constituent skills, knowledge, and attitudes, sequencing learning experiences, and providing opportunities for practice and remediation. Although conceptually systematic, applying such a linear model to early childhood contexts raises concerns, given that young children's learning is often non-linear, exploratory, and deeply influenced by play and social interaction. The risk lies in oversimplifying early learning processes by fitting them into rigid competency structures.

Within competency-based learning, student-centered resources are designed to support mastery of individual competencies, allowing learners to progress at their own pace while receiving continuous feedback (Guha Majumdar, 2019, Frontiers in Education, 2024). While this model aligns with principles of personalized learning, it presupposes the availability of well-designed resources and sustained feedback mechanisms. In practice, the feasibility of providing individualized pacing and regular feedback remains constrained by classroom realities such as high student–teacher ratios and limited instructional time.

The creation of enriched classrooms that incorporate play-based, discovery-oriented, and activity-based pedagogy is frequently presented as essential for effective competency-based learning. Such environments are expected to foster motivation, independence, and engagement, while promoting reasoning and critical thinking skills applicable to everyday problem-solving. However, the successful enactment of these pedagogies depends heavily on teacher expertise and institutional support, without which play-based approaches risk being reduced to superficial activities rather than meaningful learning experiences.

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A competency-based classroom is envisioned as one that encourages active participation and provides space for children to express ideas freely, with instruction aligned to developmental readiness. While individualized progression is presented as a strength of this approach, it raises practical concerns regarding classroom management and equitable learning opportunities. The emphasis on matching difficulty levels and interests aims to prevent coercive participation; yet, without careful design, such differentiation may inadvertently widen gaps among learners. Although project-based activities are intended to promote real-world connections and foster skills such as collaboration, organization, and time management, their effectiveness depends on sustained scaffolding rather than mere inclusion in the curriculum.

CBE also demands a fundamental shift in mindset, particularly in reconceptualizing learning resources from "teaching–learning material" to "learning–teaching material." This shift underscores a move away from teacher-cantered instruction towards learner-driven meaning-making. Nevertheless, the expectation that goals, competencies, and learning outcomes be treated as integrated and interdependent across domains presents significant design and implementation challenges. Inquiry-based learning that simultaneously encourages thinking, questioning, designing, and application is pedagogically desirable, yet it must be carefully contextualized and age-appropriate to ensure conceptual clarity rather than cognitive overload.

Finally, the role of institutional support systems such as NCERT, SCERTs, DIETs, and other state bodies is positioned as central to enabling this transformation through teacher training and locally relevant resource development. While the emphasis on joyful, engaging, and innovative learning materials is commendable, systemic change requires more than resource creation. Sustained faculty development, inter-organizational collaboration, focused capacity building, and exposure to exemplary national and international CBE models are frequently recommended; however, their impact depends on coherent implementation strategies and ongoing expert mentorship. Without such sustained support and feedback mechanisms, the promise of competency-based education risks remaining fragmented and unevenly realized across the educational landscape.

Challenges in implementing CBE

Any paradigm shift in education is inherently complex and cannot be reduced to policy intent alone. Ensuring the rigor and quality of competency-based education (CBE),

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maintaining its credibility, and aligning demonstrated competencies with prescribed learning goals present substantial challenges. The assessment of competencies in early childhood is particularly demanding, as it requires high levels of professional expertise, developmentally appropriate tools, and shared evaluative standards. At present, clearly articulated and widely accepted criteria for measuring competencies in young children remain underdeveloped, raising concerns about reliability, validity, and comparability of assessments.

NEP 2020 advocates the integration of play, arts, sports, and indigenous cultural resources into experiential learning, a direction that is theoretically aligned with constructivist and socio-cultural learning frameworks. However, the empirical evidence documenting the effective large-scale implementation of these approaches remains limited. Policy discourse often assumes a linear transition from rote-based pedagogy to competency-oriented practice, overlooking deeply entrenched systemic constraints such as curricular overload, high-stakes assessment pressures, insufficient teacher preparation, and the continued dominance of textbook-centric teaching routines. These structural factors significantly mediate how reforms are interpreted and enacted at the classroom level.

Large class sizes in preschool and primary grades further complicate the implementation of CBE, particularly in resource-constrained settings. High student–teacher ratios reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction, individualized feedback, and peer engagement, all of which are central to competency-based learning. Given the diverse learning needs and paces of students, uniform instructional delivery in overcrowded classrooms risks privileging some learners while marginalizing others. As noted by (Isaboke et al., 2021; O'Sullivan & Bruce, 2014)., such conditions limit the feasibility of learner-cantered pedagogies and pose significant barriers to the effective operationalization of competency-based curricula.

The expanding role of teachers within CBE frameworks also warrants critical attention. Contemporary teachers are increasingly expected to function simultaneously as subject experts, facilitators, mentors, counselors, and reflective practitioners. While this multifaceted role aligns with progressive educational ideals, it places considerable cognitive and emotional demands on teachers. As (Gadiraju, 2017; Njiru & Odundo, 2024) argues, a one-size-fits-all curriculum is insufficient to address learner diversity, necessitating deliberate efforts to personalize learning pathways. Without sustained professional

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development and institutional support, however, such expectations risk overburdening teachers and undermining instructional quality.

Finally, the infrastructural requirements of CBE represent a significant departure from traditional models of passive learning. Competency-based approaches depend on active learning environments supported by appropriate physical spaces, digital technologies, and instructional resources. The expectation that institutions adopt modern classrooms, creative spaces, laboratories, and technology-enabled tools assumes levels of investment and administrative readiness that may not be uniformly present. Moreover, administrators' understanding of competency-based outcomes and assessment practices remains uneven, underscoring the need for targeted capacity building and leadership training. Without systemic alignment across foundational, middle, and secondary stages, there is a risk that competencies developed in the early years may be assessed inconsistently or devalued at later stages of schooling. Consequently, the successful adoption of CBE requires not only pedagogical reform but also sustained institutional commitment, cross-level coherence, and continuous professional support.

In a nutshell, to mitigate the above major challenges of implementation of CBE when it comes to early years, readiness in the following domains is essential:

- Teacher Readiness: one has to admit that these are certainly the times when various generations are living in the same time frame. With the sudden boom in digital technologies, a 50-year-plus government school teacher struggle to complete online training/teaching. Moreover, any teacher in today's world is not only expected to teach the subject but rather serve several other roles at the same time. Hence, equipping teachers in the best way possible is a prerequisite. Learning diverse teaching and learning theories that concentrate on learning outcomes with precise, quantifiable definitions of knowledge, skill, and learner behaviour is a requirement for training to become a competency-based educator (Tambwe, M. A. 2019).
- Curriculum Readiness: likewise, when it comes to CBL one single set curriculum would not work for everyone and hence each state/educational board, the school has to come up with the advanced learning teaching material that will foster these competencies. Teaching and learning techniques that aid in the development and display of a competency must be used in competency-based curriculum. The specification of the learning outcomes and objectives in competency-based education must be precise and

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supported by research. The learning objectives must include performance standards of specific competencies. Both teachers and students must understand this well. It is important to be explicit about the desired learning results, how performance is evaluated, and how the learning objectives relate to the outcomes.

- School Readiness: we must develop ways to build, finance, acquire, and maintain the infrastructure that will make competency a reality for every teacher and student in every classroom if we are to give them the education they require to flourish in a globally linked world. Schools should be provided with necessary institutional support through the creation of an environment that is supportive and hospitable for teaching and learning. Provision for on-the-job training, necessary teaching and learning facilities and resources must be embedded in the system. Also, an efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess the implementation of the CBE system would be needed.
- Fast and result-driven efforts with the help of multimodal learning by using all possible ways with a focused approach will accelerate the process.

Conclusion

The inclusion of pre-primary years within the formal education system presents a timely opportunity to introduce transformative reforms aimed at improving the quality and relevance of early learning outcomes. While competency-based learning (CBL) is often positioned as a means to enhance school readiness, reduce grade repetition and dropout rates, and increase progression to higher education, such outcomes are contingent upon careful and context-sensitive implementation. Claims regarding improved long-term educational trajectories must therefore be examined critically, as the benefits of CBL are neither automatic nor uniform across diverse schooling contexts.

Empirical and theoretical literature suggests that competency-based education, when implemented with fidelity, has the potential to improve quality and consistency, reduce time to completion, and provide more accurate measures of student learning (O'Sullivan & Bruce, 2014). However, these outcomes are largely derived from systems with strong institutional capacity and well-established assessment mechanisms. Transposing such models to early childhood and foundational stages, particularly within heterogeneous and resource-constrained education systems, requires cautious adaptation rather than direct adoption.

The shift away from conventional, content-driven models towards approaches that emphasize equity, engagement, and deeper learning has been widely advocated as necessary for preparing learners for contemporary social and economic realities (Voorhees, 2001).

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Competency-based education is increasingly promoted as a response to this challenge; yet its rapid expansion risks privileging policy enthusiasm over pedagogical readiness. Without sustained teacher support, curricular coherence, and aligned assessment practices, the promise of enhanced learner engagement may remain aspirational.

Proponents argue that an early emphasis on skill-building can equip children with the life skills required for adulthood, thereby extending the relevance of schooling beyond the accumulation of textbook knowledge (Bhardwaj, 2016; Ramdev & Bhandari, 2025). While this orientation is conceptually sound, its success depends on ensuring that competencies are meaningfully defined, developmentally appropriate, and reinforced across successive stages of schooling. Policy-level reforms alone are insufficient to guarantee equitable outcomes; rather, systemic attention to implementation quality, institutional capacity, and learner diversity is essential. Only under such conditions can competency-based reforms contribute to expanding access to meaningful education, particularly for children who have historically been the most marginalized within the education system

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