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 Email:- Mo. 9429429550 ctefeduinspire@gmail.com

National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS), 2022: Pedagogical Shifts and its Implications for Early Childhood Care and Education in India

Dr. Md. Afroz Alam

Assistant Professor, College of Teacher Education (CTE), Darbhanga,
 Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, INDIA

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7902-0586>
afroz@manuu.edu.in

Dr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad

Assistant Professor, College of Teacher Education (CTE), Darbhanga,
 Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, INDIA

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9905-9568>
drfakhruddin@manuu.edu.in

Prof. Md. Faiz Ahmad

Professor & Principal, College of Teacher Education (CTE), Darbhanga,
 Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, INDIA

faiz@manuu.edu.in

Abstract

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 is an important milestone in the development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India. This document will be the operational framework to the bigger goals articulated in National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This research paper is a critical review of NCF-FS 2022. The study focuses on the evolution of preschool methods, which were previously disconnected, into one consistent, developmentally suitable approach. This research particularly examines the conceptual basis of a paradigm that uniquely merges the indigenous epistemic tradition of Panchakosha Vikas (five fold development) with contemporary globally acknowledged developmental psychology. It describes the proposed scope of play-based instruction and the evidence-based balanced approach to emerging language and literacy. A qualitative content analysis identifies the categories of curricular objectives, instructional methodologies and non-punitive assessment methods in the framework. The findings point to a marked and systematic shift away from rote memorization and premature academic formalization to comprehensive, inquiry-driven and culturally embedded education. The article ends with a critique of the systemic problems of implementing this framework, especially the divide between elite private preschools and the grassroots Anganwadi system. It underscores the profound implications for teacher capacity building, localized resource allocation and the re-direction of parental expectations.

Key Words: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022), Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Panchakosha Vikas, Play based Pedagogy, NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat.

Introduction

The first eight years of life lay the irretrievable architectural foundation for human cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. Developmental neuroscience makes clear that over 85% of cumulative brain development, including establishment of crucial neuronal connections that drive language learning, self-regulation and spatial reasoning, happens before the age of six. Despite this agreement within developmental psychology, the landscape of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India has always remained highly fragmented, inequitable and generally unregulated. For years the system was characterised by a sharp divide, with under-resourced public Anganwadis that focused on health, immunisation and nutrition, but little focus on pedagogy, and a vast private preschool sector, where toddlers were often exposed to developmentally inappropriate rote learning, early literacy drills and high-stakes testing.

In response to this systemic learning crisis, often emphasized by longitudinal data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) showing serious gaps in fundamental reading and arithmetic, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 launched a radical structural redesign. It broke the standard 10+2 schooling model in favour of a 5+3+3+4 design. The new architecture proposes the first five years (age 3 to 8) as the “Foundational Stage”, which for the first time in the history of Indian education formally integrates early childhood education into the existing continuum of formal schooling. This ambitious aspiration is operationalised in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022. The goal of this initiative is to bridge the dots between policy statements and classroom practices. This is the first comprehensive curriculum framework designed for this demography in India. This document provides a critical comment on NCF-FS 2022. We do this by looking at its core principles, methodological rules and systemic background necessary for its objective.

Conceptual Framework: Bridging the Indigenous and the Contemporary

Deep investigation of the NCF-FS implies a conscious epistemological stance. For it is not just transplanting Western education systems but integrating progressive pedagogy into indigenous intellectual traditions. The conceptual framework is an intricate blend of Indian traditional educational philosophy and modern constructivist theory. The book is almost based on the notion of Panchakosha Vikas or The Five-Fold Development. The idea is found in the Taittiriya Upanishad. Rather than measuring childhood growth by a single academic criterion, the framework argues that human development is multi-dimensional, occurring across five interconnected dimensions or “sheaths” of existence. The main emphasis is on the Annamaya Kosha (Physical Layer). It improves gross and fine motor skills, nutrition, spatial awareness and all round physical health.

Pranamaya Kosha Life force or vital energy sheath. This is in terms of controlling the breath, controlling energy and unifying the mind and body. The mental and emotional layer or

Manomaya Kosha facilitates cognitive processes, emotional intelligence, empathy and the formation of interpersonal connections. The Vijnanamaya Kosha or Intellectual Layer includes the capacity for higher intellectual reasoning, logical analysis, problem-solving and critical analysis. The highest level of growth is the Anandamaya Kosha or “Inner Self” or “Bliss Layer”. Its distinguishing features are love of beauty, intrinsic enjoyment, a rootedness in culture, and a feeling of being linked to the world. The NCF-FS deliberately roots the curriculum in Panchakosha, equating physical health, emotional management and creative joy with cognitive and linguistic growth.

Constructivism and Play-Based Learning

Constructivist viewpoints align well with the Panchakosha model. The framework is strongly based on the theoretical principles of Jean Piaget (cognitive development stages), Lev Vygotsky (socio-cultural theory and Zone of Proximal Development) and Jerome Bruner (scaffolding). At the same time, it pays tribute to pioneering Indian educationists like Gijubhai Badheka, Tarabai Modak, Dr. Zakir Hussain and Mahatma Gandhi, whose views supported learning by experience. This synthesizing view of the child is one of an active constructor of meaning rather than a passive recipient of knowledge (a ‘blank slate’). Thus, the NCF-FS frames “play” not as a distraction from learning, but as the basic conceptual, operational and transactional medium of learning itself.

Objectives of the Study

1. To align the classical Indian educational philosophies (Panchakosha) with the pragmatic current developmental themes mentioned in NCF-FS 2022.
2. Critically examine the prescribed pedagogical continuum and pedagogical practices to achieve universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN).
3. To examine the framework’s proposed change from summative to formative paradigms in the evaluation of young learners.
4. To summarize major findings and explain implications at the macro and micro level of education for teacher preparation, resource allocation and policy implementation.

Methodology

The main methodological tool of this qualitative study is Document Analysis or Qualitative Content Analysis. Document analysis is a methodical process of examining and assessing documents in order to produce empirical knowledge, interpret and understand and help build meaning. The principal study document is the official “National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage 2022”, a comprehensive, detailed 360-page policy document published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. The document was subjected to a thorough and careful process of research and classification. Open coding was used to find shared educational ideas for the first time. Then, the data were categorized into axial codes including the objectives of the curriculum, language instruction frameworks, play classification, and assessment

standards. The analytical validity was established by triangulating the data with the basic tenets of NEP 2020 and existing research in early childhood education.

Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis gave important insight into the integration of the philosophical framework of NCF-FS into educational practice. This section includes an investigation of three key matrices namely Developmental Domains, Pedagogical Execution and Literacy Acquisition.

1. *Applying Philosophy in Practice: The Panchakosha Matrix*

One of the serious problems in curriculum creation is how to translate abstract theory into specific instructional activities. The transformation performed by the NCF-FS is given in Table-1.

Table 1: Alignment of Panchakosha with NCF Curricular Domains

Indian Tradition (Panchakosha)	NCF Developmental Domain	Exemplar Curricular Goals (CG)
Annamaya & Pranamaya Kosha	Physical Development	CG-1: Develops habits that keep them healthy and safe. CG-3: Develops a fit and flexible body.
Manomaya Kosha	Socio-Emotional and Ethical Development	CG-4: Develops emotional intelligence and social norms. CG-5: Develops a positive attitude towards productive work (Seva).
Vijnanamaya Kosha	Cognitive Development	CG-7: Makes sense of the world through observation and logic. CG-8: Develops mathematical understanding.
Vijnanamaya Kosha (Applied)	Language and Literacy Development	CG-9: Develops effective communication in two languages. CG-10: Develops fluency in reading/writing in L1.
Anandamaya Kosha	Aesthetic and Cultural Development	CG-12: Develops abilities and sensibilities in visual and performing arts.
Indian Tradition (Panchakosha)	NCF Developmental Domain	Exemplar Curricular Goals (CG)
Annamaya & Pranamaya Kosha	Physical Development	CG-1: Develops habits that keep them healthy and safe. CG-3: Develops a fit and flexible body.

The matrix above defines a well planned procedure for mapping. The framework explains the overall progress accomplished by creating linkages among the several measurable Curricular Goals (CGs) under each Kosha. The Manomaya Kosha describes concrete socio-emotional abilities like emotional regulation and cooperative play, and provides teachers with precise directions on how to embed these skills. The understanding of a child to share resources (ethical development) is as important as their knowledge to count to ten (cognitive

development) and the educational system must place the priority of this understanding over everything else.

2. *Deconstructing the Pedagogical Continuum: The Architecture of Play*

The term “Play-based learning” is frequently used. The NCF-FS 2022, however, offers a more complex play framework in three layers. This paradigm recognizes that different learning outcomes require different levels of teacher participation.

Table 2: The Pedagogical Continuum (Play-Based Learning)

Type of Play	Locus of Control	Role of the Child	Role of the Teacher
Free Play	Child-led, Child-directed	Autonomously decides what, how, and with whom to play. Negotiates rules dynamically.	Architect of the environment. Organizes stimulating materials, observes closely, and intervenes only when safety requires it or the child explicitly asks.
Guided Play	Child-led, Teacher-supported	Initiates and leads play, but within a curated context.	Co-player and facilitator. Offers scaffolding, asks open-ended questions (“I wonder what happens if...”), and gently nudges play toward specific learning objectives.
Structured Play	Teacher-led, Child-active	Actively listens, follows pre-established rules, and participates in gamified learning.	Pedagogical designer. Plans specific games and activities with sequential rules to promote targeted cognitive or physical competencies (e.g., phonics bingo, obstacle courses).

The facts in the table above blur the usual line between “play,” meaning trivial interests, and “learning,” meaning serious academic pursuits. The construction is designed to provide a smooth continuity. A situation in which the child and the teacher rotate in leadership. It is critical that an experienced educator knows when to step back and let natural curiosity lead (Free Play) and when to step in with purposeful scaffolding (Guided and Structured Play) to meet key developmental milestones while keeping the activity inherently enjoyable.

3. *Decoding the Literacy Strategy: The Four-Block Model*

The NCF-FS addresses the issue of foundational literacy through a ‘Balanced Literacy Approach’ that has evidence-based research to support it. This strategy ends the long-standing issue of whole-language education vs phonics-based instruction.

Table 3: Balanced Approach to Early Language and Literacy

Block	Component	Core Instructional Focus
Block 1	<i>Oral Language</i>	<i>Conversation, storytelling, role play, dramatic expression, and active vocabulary expansion.</i>
Block 2	<i>Word Recognition</i>	<i>Explicit decoding, phonemic awareness, establishing letter-sound (grapheme-phoneme) mapping, and blending.</i>
Block 3	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Read-alouds, shared reading of big books, guided reading groups, and eventually, independent reading for comprehension.</i>
Block 4	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Modelled writing by the teacher, shared writing, guided penmanship, and emergent independent writing (drawing/scribbling as precursors to text).</i>

The above table-3 shows that the Four-Block Model acknowledges an important principle of cognitive science: human brains are naturally equipped to learn spoken language (Block 1), while reading and writing are human inventions that must be taught explicitly and systematically (Blocks 2, 3, and 4). As indicated in the table above. The framework blocks out time each day for these four areas. Children will not just learn to decode text mechanically without understanding it, nor will they learn a large vocabulary without the necessary phonics abilities that are crucial to independent reading. This is what will be the case in this particular instance.

Findings

The qualitative analysis of the NCF-FS 2022 highlights a number of transformational directions that are transformational for early education in India.

- ***The Primacy of the Mother Tongue (L1)***

The NCF-FS has demanded a stop to the age-old chase for early English-medium instruction by proposing that the child's home language, mother tongue or local language should be the main medium of instruction. The essay argues that cognitive science suggests that the most effective way of developing conceptual brain links is to think in the language the young person is thinking in. So when you teach a kid a new subject, for example subtraction, in a non-native language (English), the cognitive load is huge and the child simply memorizes the answer instead of actually understanding it.

- ***Abolition of Prescribed Textbooks (Ages 3-6)***

A significant structural difference is that the framework explicitly says that there should be no required textbooks in the first three years of the foundational stage (Balvatika/Anganwadi). Two-dimensional writing is thought to be quite insufficient for the cognitive processing of a three-year-old. The "curriculum" must include the physical environment with manipulatives, indigenous toys, puzzles, natural materials and quality children's reading such as picture books.

- ***Re-thought Assessment***

The NCF-FS is critical of the present culture of testing and clearly states that young learners should not be subjected to written tests. Assessment is re-thought as an ongoing, invisible process. Rather than in forced testing situations, teachers are expected to use observational instruments such as anecdotal records, event sampling, and developmental checklists to assess a child's progress through daily interactions.

- ***The Holistic Progress Card (HPC)***

The existing report cards that limit a child's potential to arbitrary numerical scores will be supplanted by a Holistic Progress Card. This extensive document tracks the development of the child in the areas of cognition, emotion and psychomotor skills. Importantly, it incorporates the child's self-assessment ("I can build a tall tower") and qualitative parent comments, shifting the purpose of the assessment from an evaluative tool to a collaborative growth framework.

Discussion

The NCF-FS 2022 offers an idealistic and contextually relevant framework for decolonisation and modernisation of Indian education. It includes local traditions, folklore and "Toy-based pedagogy" (using indigenous toys like Channapatna wooden blocks or native clay figurines) to root the learning experience within the child's immediate cultural context. The structural obstacles to the actual putting into practice of this ambitious text at the grassroots level are immense. The structural convergence is the fundamental bottleneck. The first stage covers children in Anganwadis (under Ministry of Women and Child Development) and primary schools (under Ministry of Education). Traditionally Anganwadi personnel have worked on health and nutrition but now they are encouraged to utilize advanced educational approaches like 'scaffolded guided play'. There needs to be substantial cooperation between ministries and investment in infrastructure, or the gap between the privileged private preschools and the public Anganwadis would just widen. In the Indian setting, early childhood education is sometimes wrongly equated with early academic acceleration. The quality of a preschool is commonly judged by many parents on how soon a three-year-old child can write the English alphabet or recite times tables. The NCF's move away from early writing to oral development, gross motor play and socio-emotional learning will undoubtedly clash with entrenched societal expectations of "success".

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have immediate and far-reaching implications for many stakeholders within the educational environment.

- ***Macro-level (Teacher Education and Policy)***

The traditional forms of nursery teacher preparation are outmoded. There is a need for considerable reform in pre-service frameworks, particularly the new Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) and in-service training routes. Teachers require rigorous and practical instruction in content knowledge, emergent literacy, play psychology and the intricacies of non-intrusive observational evaluation.

- **Meso-Level (Institutional Resource Allocation)**

Budgets in schools need to be rapidly reconfigured. Those resources, typically spent on textbooks and workbooks in the early grades, should be used to build “print-rich settings”. Classrooms need investment in reading space, long-lasting manipulatives, art supplies and culturally relevant Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs). Further, DIETs (District Institutes of Education and Training) need to stop functioning as administrative bodies but instead provide ongoing academic on-site mentorship to teachers as they transition.

- **Micro-Level (Community and Parental Partnerships)**

Schools need to develop strong community engagement programs. They need to be taught the neurology of play. Parents do. Schools need to show in workshops and open-house demonstrations how building a block tower creates a foundation for geometry, or how stringing beads improves a child’s pincer grasp for writing. Schools can educate parents as knowledgeable stakeholders to relieve the urge to revert to rote learning only.

Conclusion

The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) to be adopted in 2022 is not simply a reform of curriculum but a major paradigm shift. The method of teaching is certainly in agreement with all the developing rhythms of the kid, cultural environment and natural joy. This formalizes a play-based, multilingual, holistic approach based on the old, all-encompassing philosophy of Panchakosha. In particular it offers a scientifically tested method for the elimination of the model of rote learning, and hence the achievement of universal reading and numeracy. But policy texts cannot change classrooms on their own. The NCF-FS comes into play when it deliberately incorporates the teacher empowerment, adequate funding for infrastructure and a societal transformation in the way the learning process in early life is looked at. The systematic implementation of NCF-FS 2022 in accordance with its core principles is expected to have a profound effect on the development of human capital in India. This would ensure that the basis of lifelong learning is culturally based and entirely equitable.

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