Transforming Early Childhood Education: Re-Envisioning The Child In NEP 2020

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 lays out a strategy for the future of education in India which calls for a change. The policy talks about several aspect of holistic education for children but lays emphasis on early years bringing the foundational year of young children lives to the fore front. In this paper authors have attempted to underline the multilateral learning along with highlighting the importance of promoting emotional skills with a focus on Early Childhood Education (ECE) and early years. In resonance with the NEP 2020, this paper points out that it is important to change ECCE for the holistic development of young children by optimizing abilities like creativity, analytical thinking and a whole-person approach. NEP addresses the crucial aspect of inclusive education, emphasizing diverse learning needs and socio-economic backgrounds. Importantly, regardless of where one lives or one's socioeconomic status, this policy stresses making accessible quality ECCE to every child. This article looks into innovative changes required to align present ECE classroom practices with these policy goals; as well as foregrounding key tenets for effecting them. It will also highlight the four main principles that support this transformation. This piece examines pedagogical approaches necessary to shift from rote memorization towards experiential and play-based methodologies encouraging exploration and curiosity-based learning processes. It will also look at how childhood teachers should be equipped more professionally through their continual professional development ensuring that they are always creating inclusive learning environments. Finally, the paper identifies potential challenges faced when implementing this momentous revolution which ranges from infrastructure to mindset shifts and proposes strategies to tackle these challenges head-on.

Keywords: Early childhood, Education, NEP 2020, Holistic Development |

Introduction

The landscape of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is undergoing an intense transformation world-wide, driven by evolving societal values, advancements in educational research, and policy reforms. At the heart of this transformation lies a fundamental re-envisioning of the child – not merely as a passive recipient of knowledge but as an active, curious, and capable learner deserving of holistic development.

This paper delves into the intricacies of this paradigm shift, focusing specifically on the implications for early childhood education within the framework of NEP 2020 in India. By critically examining the policy's objectives, strategies, and envisioned outcomes, we aim to unravel the potential opportunities and challenges it presents for stakeholders involved in ECE, including educators, policymakers, parents, and most importantly, the children themselves.

In the pages that follow, we navigate through the theoretical underpinnings of early childhood education, contextualizing them within the socio-cultural fabric of India. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, sociology, and education studies, this paper examines interlinkages between NEP 2020 and seeks to align ECE practices with contemporary theoretical understandings of child development. Furthermore, we analyze the policy's provisions for infrastructure, curriculum, teacher training, and parental involvement, assessing their adequacy in nurturing the diverse needs and potentials of young learners.

This paper is not merely a theoretical discourse but a call for action to all stakeholders invested in the future of early childhood education in India. By critically engaging with the principles and proposals outlined in NEP 2020, we strive to catalyze constructive dialogue and informed decision-making that empowers every child to realize their fullest potential, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and socio-economic prosperity.

History of Early Childhood Education: Global Views

When we try to understand the global trends in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies and programs, we face a challenge: there's not enough data available from individual countries, let alone comparisons between them. Research studies highlight the beginning of ECE playschools and kindergartens in developing nations like India and China in the 19th century. They often followed similar models inspired by educators like Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Montessori, as well as the efforts of missionaries. In the European historical underpinning of ECE, there was a distinction between "kindergartens" for education(E) and day nurseries for childcare (CC) (Willekens, 2020). The advancement was slow during World War II except for the eastern European socialist countries. Historically the period since 1886 as seen in France, soon after the war saw extensive early childhood education and care (ECCE) development simultaneously. This period witnessed expansion of the *ecole maternelle* in the 1950s and 60s. The African countries also marked this period as the end of colonialism. Now the 'new work force' comprised of women along with men thus extensive policies for child and family welfare were evolved. To add impetus to the changing scenario of ECCE were debates between Care vs Development as the critical concern (Kamerman,2006).

Often recognised and said as early childhood development (ECD) is present globally in vision and objectives of several nations' policies with an emphasis to reach out to the most vulnerable children (Yoshikawa et,al, 2018). These policies aim at achieving ECD in different ways, across various development sectors. For instance, some countries focus on providing quality health care and nutrition for the first 1000 days of life as they recognize the importance of these factors in child development (Aggarwal, 2021). Furthermore, efforts aim to ensure that vulnerable children have access to early education programs that foster cognitive, social and emotional growths. The success of policy implementation is linked to assessing at risk children especially the most affected ones by developmental disorders or a disability (Agarwal,et.al. 2021)

ECCE in India

The implementation of universal early childhood education (ECE) in India represents a recent endeavour. Historically, formal education in India was predominantly accessible to male members of high-caste groups, leading to widespread illiteracy among children from low-caste families and female children. This historical context has contributed to an unequal distribution of educational opportunities within the population.

Nationally and globally several prominent visionaries and their philosophies guided the field of early childhood education in the country. One such influence ways back to the year 1939 when Maria Montessori visited India. Several Indian educators trained in Montessori's pedagogical approach supported the groundwork of creating learning spaces in early years. Her seminal works were translated into various Indian languages, fostering the proliferation of Montessori preschools across India, some of which are affiliated with Montessori International. Throughout the post-independence era, early childhood education has remained a focal point of government initiatives. It was identified that relying solely on parental responsibility for early childhood education will not be enough for holistic development of young children. The brain-storming of educationists advocated envisioning pre-primary classrooms as and within existing Indian primary schools. In timeline of ECCE in India, the Child Care Committees have emphasized the need for a comprehensive overhaul of preschool educational policies; aligning them with the national goals. The significant recommendations have been made by the Kothari Commission (1964) and the National Policy on Children (1974). NEP, 2020 as a policy positioned early childhood education as a catalyst for achieving compulsory primary education goals and enhancing human resource development.

In 1986, the National Policy on Education reiterated the significance of early childhood education as a means to reinforce compulsory primary education objectives and foster holistic human resource development. The "Program of Action" report issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 1993 identified specific demographic groups as priority targets for the expansion of early childhood education. These groups include children residing in economically disadvantaged urban and rural areas, those belonging to tribal communities, and those with special needs or disabilities.

Present government efforts are concentrated on extending ECE opportunities to these marginalized groups and devising curricular frameworks tailored to their distinct needs, thereby advancing the overarching goal of universal access to quality early childhood education in India.

NEP transforming ECCE

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasize implementing various transformative steps both structurally and curricularly. These include moving towards holistic and multidisciplinary education; promoting critical thinking and creativity; integrating technology into teaching, learning and assessment processes.

Key Elements of NEP
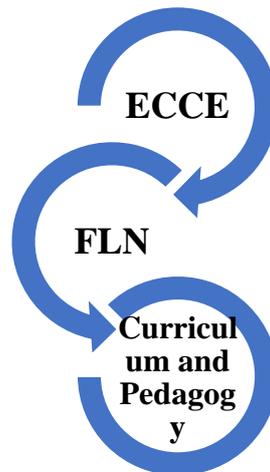The three key features of NEP 2020 as highlighted in the figure below:

Figure 1: Three Key Elements of NEP for School Implementation

The landscape of preschool education in India has seen advancements in accessibility, yet persistent challenges remain, warranting further efforts towards ensuring quality provision. Aligned with the objectives outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 and the commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.2 by 2030—pertaining to universal access to high-quality pre-primary education—there exists a potential avenue for equitable access to and enhancement of preschool education standards.

To this end, a comprehensive framework is imperative for augmenting ECCE, encompassing facets such as universal access to quality early childhood education, holistic development through play-based learning modalities, and the provision of requisite training and support mechanisms for educators to effectively deliver ECCE.

The NEP 2020 emphasizes the need of vocational education as a tool for arming students with useful skills fit for obtaining good job possibilities. Furthermore, it underscores the principle of inclusive education, advocating against the exclusion of any child based on perceived ability. In accordance with the policy directives, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is tasked with developing two distinct sub-frameworks: one catering to children aged from birth to three years, and another targeting those aged three to eight years. These sub-frameworks are envisaged to constitute a robust curriculum and pedagogical blueprint for early childhood education, spanning from infancy to the age of eight. By facilitating a seamless transition for children across these formative years, the sub-frameworks endeavour to afford them a holistic educational trajectory, fostering continuity and coherence in their developmental journey.
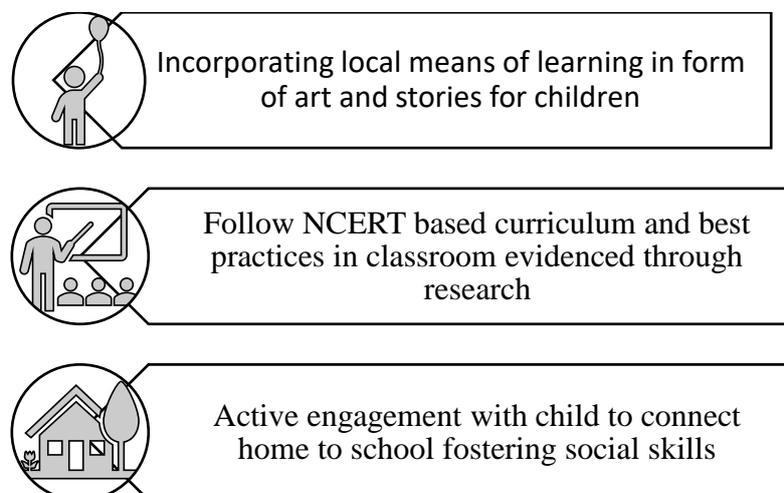

Figure 2 Focus on ECCE in NEP

Holistic ECCE Approach in the Policy

- **Universal Access:** The NEP endeavours to achieve universal access to high-quality early childhood education for children aged 3 to 6 by the year 2025. This initiative encompasses the provision of quality pre-primary education both within Anganwadi centers and integrated within formal school settings.
- **Integrated Curriculum**: The policy advocates for an integrated curriculum approach characterized by play-based and activity-based methodologies. This pedagogical framework is designed to facilitate holistic development, addressing cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical domains concurrently.
- **Teacher Training:** Central to the NEP's implementation strategy is the prioritization of training and capacity building initiatives targeting Anganwadi workers and early childhood educators. These efforts are aimed at equipping educators with the requisite competencies and pedagogical acumen necessary for the effective delivery of the prescribed curriculum.

Key initiatives of NEP towards quality ECCE

1. **Integration of Anganwadis:** The National Education Policy (NEP) is aimed at incorporating Anganwadi centers in the formal education system to ensure a gradual progression of children from preschool to primary school. This integration aims at creating a strong basis for children's learning and development by making it possible for the child to transit smoothly from early childhood education and care to formal elementary schooling. By including Anganwadi centers into the formal education system, NEP seeks to connect preschool institutions with primary schools, thereby facilitating the comprehensive development of children and enhancing educational outcomes (Arora, 2006; Singh, 2022; Samanta, 2017; Malik, 2015). For example, NEP emphasizes an appropriate environment that can assist in the multidimensional growth during early childhood period. It involves developing child-friendly environments that take care of their physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs. In addition to this, the integration of Anganwadi services into the official education system (the school) ensures that children receive adequate nutrition as well as support in areas such as health care hence promoting their overall development (Singh, 2022).

2. **Multi-lingual Classroom:** The mother tongue or regional language is used as a medium of instruction at the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) level, up until grade five as per National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Vyas, 2022). It helps children in understanding, remembering and conversing the concepts in their 'own language'. This policy envisages rejuvenating ECCE to address the problems of socially disadvantaged young children (Gandhi, 2021). Besides, studies have pointed out that students who are taught in their mother tongue or regional language achieve higher cognitive development and academic performance (Vyas, 2022). NEP 2020 wants to promote the use of local languages in education system for inclusive and cultural diversity preservation purposes. On the other hand, this would require more research on how kindergarten teachers can integrate everyday conversations into lessons that promote language learning and knowledge construction. Some researchers suggest that integrating these into kindergarten curriculum leads to better acquisition of language alongside knowledge building. Teacher can provide a supportive inclusive learning environment for economically deprived pupils by using the mother tongue/ regional dialects. However, further research has yet to be done concerning its effective strategies in implementing this approach long-term outcomes on child's education.

3. **Technology Integration**

Digital Tools: Use of technology and digital resources for ECCE, including the development of interactive e-content, apps, and digital games, to make learning engaging and accessible.

4. Community Engagement

Involvement of Parents: Encourages parental involvement in a child's early education, recognizing the crucial role of families and communities in a child's overall development. Parents and community play an important stake in implementing the National Education The involvement of parents and the community in the implementation of the NEP 2020 is not only crucial for adult education and lifelong learning programs, but also for revitalizing early childhood care and education in disadvantaged communities. High school is an example of this phenomenon. The role that parents' play in children's education cannot be underscored enough. For instance, Gandhi (2022) argues that adult education programs are vital for society as a whole, including parents who facilitate such programs through their participation in them. Another point the article makes is that by implementing these principles, we can see how "early childhood development programs aimed at providing care services to vulnerable young children living below the poverty line are set to be revived" (Gandhi, 2021). According to Panditrao (2020), "The NEP stresses on several aspects like inclusiveness, equity, quality; values; multi-literacy; technology integration; mutual trust between students & teacher etc". Moreover, Gandhiji(2019) also agree with Punditrao's assertion that this plan takes into consideration community and parental involvement which it says are critical for it to be effectively achieved at all levels including higher education. Parents must take part in implementing National Education Policy because they play a major role in child's upbringing. Engagement Strategies: Encourages active involvement of parents and communities in a child's early education, recognizing their crucial role in a child's overall development.

5.   Quality Assurance and Monitoring

Quality Standards: Implementation of quality standards and regular monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of ECCE programs across all regions.

6. Emphasis on Nutrition and Health:

Nutritional Support: Provision of nutritious meals and healthcare services in ECCE centers to ensure the holistic well-being of children.

7. Advocacy and Awareness

Public Awareness Campaigns: Efforts to raise awareness among parents and communities about the significance of early childhood care and education.

Key pedagogical approaches

Child and Educational Approaches in relation to early childhood care and education, the NEP 2020 offers a range of pedagogical approaches. These approaches are geared towards the overall growth of the child in terms of creativity, critical thinking and general wellbeing in her/his early years. The key pedagogical approaches as outlined in the NEP 2020 are:

Play Based Learning: The significance of play as an instrument for learning is recognized by this policy that proposes a play-based and activity-oriented approach for ECCE in order to promote children's exploration, creativity, and social interaction.

Hands-On Experiences: This policy promotes practical learning by encouraging hands-on activities and experiences with which children can engage themselves; hence enabling them to learn by doing thereby enhancing curiosity as well as problem-solving skills.

Integrated Learning: A multidisciplinary approach that incorporates different subjects and activities is advocated through it. By so doing, it encourages comprehensive understanding while giving room for children to explore different fields of knowledge.

Learning in Local Languages: Early years' teaching should be done using mother tongue or regional languages. That helps with better comprehension, cognitive development and cultural preservation.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices: It emphasizes on developmentally appropriate practices that suit the age, abilities and interests of young kids. In line with cognitive, emotional plus physical developmental stages it means designing curriculum.

Digital and Technological Integration: This seeks technology integration in ECCE by ensuring availability of age-appropriate digital resources as well as educational tools aimed at bolstering their learning experience thus equipping them for a world driven by technology.

These pedagogical approaches outlined in the NEP 2020 for ECCE prioritize a child-centric, experiential, inclusive learning environment. They aim at laying strong foundations for children by nurturing their curiosity, creativity and holistic development during the formative years of education.

NEP On Early Childhood Educators

The most crucial element in realizing all the intended goals of ECCE is having trained early childhood educators. There are those who facilitate learning and guide instead of instructing. They often observe what children have interest in and come up with activities that can create room for discussion and which are aimed at making children critically analyze different situations or ideas. The policy recommends adequate training for these educators so that they can create environments full of resources and experiences that stimulate curiosity and promote inquiry. Another area addressed by the policy is the professional development of ECCE educators. Ongoing education along with professional growth among instructors remains very important to effectively implement these pedagogical approaches since it helps them to acquire relevant knowledge and skills needed in this case. The focus turns on capacity building through training of early childhood care providers like Anganwadi workers, to implement these pedagogical approaches effectively. It highlights continual teacher competency improvement through regular in-service training courses.

The road ahead: Re-envisioning the Child in NEP

A transformative outlook emerges when considering the child through NEP (National Education Policy) 2020 and its challenges. This shift, evident through the NEP's call for cooperation between government and public as well as different stakeholders' engagement represents a movement towards acknowledging children as central figures of education. It is a change from traditional hierarchical methods of teaching to one that embraces the learners' contributions. The re-imagination of child embarked by reference to infrastructure gaps in NEP illustrates how much importance has been given to environmental facilitation of their all-rounded growth. Instead, it visualizes him/her as someone who can do better with proper facilities and favourable infrastructure support than being treated solely as an object of education. Thus, this policy sees the child at the focal point of educational reforms because it acknowledges how learning environment affects their past developments. By putting Save the Children's status report on "under six" in India within context, this section also re-imagines the child taking into consideration peculiarities of early childhood years. The policy recognizes

that each child undergoes various stages such as existing provisions; gaps and constraints pertaining to ECCE which are identified here. This way is aimed at understanding children in details while stressing significance attached to interventions conducted at early ages thus shaping their ways ahead. Moreover, there is another way through which focusing on diverse trends in health, nutrition and pre-school coverage across states may reimagine a child within his/her socio-cultural sphere . Addressing these issues requires policies that are region specific rather than treating all kids uniformly since they come from different backgrounds which shape who they become later on. In other words it doesn't just draw attention away from approaches that consider students equal but stresses looking into what is pertinent before embarking on nurturing potential among children. To sum up, NEP 2020 along with challenges associated with it shows us a reborn vision about schoolchild in educational environment. The child is seen as an active participant in the policy while infrastructure development and early childhood care are significant to it. Moreover, embracing diversity and context specific initiatives enhances this rethinking; viewing the child as a flexible person influenced by his/her personal background and environmental factors.

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