

Decoding NEP 2020-The Road Ahead

The National Education Policy 2020 unveiled by the Ministry of Education has been the focus of much attention, discussion and debate, and not without reason. Coming, as it does, three decades after the last NEP in 1984 and the first one to be introduced in the 21st century, NEP 2020 is bold and ambitious both in scope and scale and envisions a complete overhauling of the education sector. The proposed allocation of 6% of India's GDP to the sector is indicative of the government's commitment to making the vision a reality.

But, beyond the hype and hoopla, what does NEP 2020 mean in real, tangible terms to students, teachers and parents? How is it going to impact schools once the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) is redesigned by NCERT in line with the latest policy, and implemented by 2022-23 academic session?

To understand the new policy impact, it will help to break it down into four components broadly: School Structure, Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment or simply put, the Who, the What and the How of education followed by a report on all three.

In terms of Academic or School Structure, the new education policy seeks to replace the existing 10+2 format with a 5+3+3+4 format based on the cognitive developmental stages of the child. The five years of Foundation Stage (Pre-Nur. to II) will be followed by three years of Preparatory Stage (III to V), another three years of Middle Stage (VI-VIII) and four years of Secondary Stage (IX-XII). The transformational aspect of this structure is most evident in the Foundation Stage, or the first five years of the school for ages 3 to 8. For the first time, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which includes 3 years of pre-primary school (age 3-6), preceding grade I-II, have been included in the ambit of Indian education system. This is based on the recognition that these early years are most significant for the cognitive growth of children and building strong foundations early in a child's life must be given the highest priority. To that end, the National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) will formulate a blueprint for expected learning outcomes, age appropriate curriculum, activities and methodology. However, it may be noted that there will be no addition to the actual number of school years, which will remain the same.

Some of the other significant changes announced by the NEP pertain to School Curriculum, the most prominent being a clear intent to reduce the curricular load to its core essentials. The logic is simple: reduce the burden of curriculum and increase the scope and depth of learning. The focus of the syllabus will be on key concepts and ideas which will not only reduce academic stress but also free the teachers to focus on conceptual understanding and higher order thinking skills, thus making the shift from content to competencies.

The main thrust of the curriculum in the early years will be to develop Foundational Literary and Numeracy skills (FLN) i.e., reading, writing and mathematics, besides promoting curiosity, ethics, etiquette, good behaviour and self-identity. In the following stages, multi-disciplinary and integrated learning will be the mantra, and the existing separations between different subjects will be eliminated and rigid silos of curricular-extracurricular, vocational-academic, science-humanities etc. will be dismantled. In addition, students at the senior secondary level will have the flexibility of choosing subjects across different streams as per their interest and inclination and traditional streams of Science, Humanities and Commerce will be a thing of the past.

Two areas that have received special attention from NEP 2020 are a) Vocational Studies and (b) Digital Learning and Computational Thinking. From the Middle stage, every child will be exposed to a variety of vocations and learn at least one vocation for which he/she will also have to undergo industry-based internship. The aim is to remove the stigma associated with taking up a vocation as a career and expose students to various career paths, including entrepreneurial enterprise. At the same time, AI, Coding and Design Thinking will also be introduced and taught grade VI upwards, thereby making students future-ready for the digital age.

However, even as we build citizens armed with skills and competencies required for global success in the 21st century, Indian culture, heritage, values and ethos will be given impetus in the curriculum and new textbooks prepared by NCERT will have local content and flavour. In the same spirit of nationalism, the medium of instruction up to class V will be the mother-tongue or a regional language, wherever possible. The policy also gives a nod to the current three-language formula to promote multi-lingualism but mandates that no language will be imposed.

It goes without saying that the entire educational edifice envisioned by the NEP will rest on the shoulders of the teachers. Its success will be dependent on the Pedagogy or the delivery mechanism that these teachers will employ to transact this new curriculum. The new policy takes pains to emphasize that for learning to be permanent and life-long, it should be joyful and student-driven and age appropriate. While Early Education will be play/activity based, in the Preparatory Stage (III-V) the NEP prescribes more formal, yet interactive, classroom teaching with a discovery and learning-by-doing approach. At the Middle stage and Secondary stage, where academic complexities and abstract concepts gain prominence, the chalk-talk, jug-mug approach to teaching will be replaced by innovative, experiential, enquiry-based pedagogies that integrate arts, sports and ICT, and encourage reflection, observation and evaluation. Rote-learning will be sought to be eliminated while learning outcomes and competencies will take

centre-stage.

No reform in education can be complete or effectual without a corresponding reform in the current Examination System. The reason being that most teaching by teachers and learning by learners is directed and driven by the nature of the examination. Students study what they will be tested for, and teachers will teach likewise.

In order to actualize its vision of a purposeful, competency-based education, the NEP seeks to de-emphasize exams and recommends ongoing formative assessments for measuring learning outcomes over one-time summative assessments.

Another recommendation is to conduct formal standardized school assessments at the end of grades III, V and VIII for tracking learning progress at key stages rather than just at the end, as well as for course-correction, if required.

All assessment, whether formative assessment, key stage assessment or Board assessment, will focus on testing not information and factual knowledge (the very cause of rote-learning) but core concepts, higher order thinking skills and application of knowledge. The new structure will thus promote not just assessment of learning but also assessment as learning and assessment for learning.

The shift in approach will also be reflected in the report card which will be a 3600, holistic, multi-dimensional report card that will cover a student's progress across all domains - cognitive, affective, socio-dimensional and psycho-motor domains, not unlike the now defunct CCE or Continuous, Comprehensive Evaluation system.

As for Board Exams, they will continue for both grades X and XII but the exams will be redesigned to focus on competencies and conceptual understanding, making them "easier." Also, students will have the choice of appearing for them twice a year, the second time for improvement of grades, if desired. There is also a tentative suggestion for an examination to be administered by the National Testing Agency (not unlike the SAT/ACT in America) that could also be used for admission into higher educational institutions, thus further reducing the enormous focus and concomitant stress around Board exams.

With all these sweeping changes announced, it is evident that the National Education Policy of 2020 is looking to bring a paradigm shift in how we, as a society, perceive education and how it is imparted in schools across the country. In fact, it makes us re-examine the very purpose of going to school – not to rote-learn our way through exams at the end of each year or to crack the Boards for that degree/diploma that will be the ticket to a good college and a well-paying job at the end of it. Rather, it is to learn about the world around us, to imbibe a life-long love of learning, to acquire 21st century skills and competencies and inculcate values and ethics, all

of which will not only prepare students for success in their life and career but also make them independent-minded, capable, compassionate, well-rounded and self-aware individuals.

While the aims of the policy are laudable, changing mind-sets will be the challenge – of teachers, parents and school administrators. Equally challenging will be the task of preparing and training teachers for implementing the new curriculum, the new pedagogies and assessment patterns. To its credit, the NEP has outlined a detailed plan for the professional development of teachers going forward.

It must also be said that much of the progressive change articulated by the document, and many of the ideas relating to the purpose of and approach to teaching-learning and assessments, have been around for a while and are already being practised by several private schools. However, the aim of the policy is to make comprehensive, systematic changes across all sections of the educational sector so as to make India a “knowledge hub” and build an equitable, inclusive and plural society.

Finally, NEP 2020 is a grandiose announcement of a grand vision. It is the need of the hour as India asserts to find its rightful place on the world stage. However, the success of the new education policy, as with any policy, will ultimately depend on how all its stakeholders will walk the talk.

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