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NEP 2020 and Secondary Education in India: A Historical Perspective and Critical Assessment of Its Impact

Ms. Parvathi Vijay

Resource Person, Centre of Excellence (CoE), CBSE, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks an important step in the development of school education in India. Over the years, educational policies have aimed to improve access to education and raise learning standards. However, concerns about rote learning, examination pressure and the limited opportunities for children to apply their knowledge in real-life situations continue to influence discussions on school education. This paper traces the history and growth of educational policies in India, with reference to NEP 2020 and its implications for secondary school education. It examines the policy's emphasis on experiential learning, flexible subject choices, continuous assessment and the development of skills beyond academic achievement. It also considers the practical challenges schools may face while putting these ideas into practice, particularly in relation to teacher preparedness, workload, classroom time and the expectations associated with examinations. Drawing on professional observations from school practice, the paper highlights the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions, expressing their thoughts and learning from mistakes. It also reflects on the role of teachers in making learning meaningful and the need to provide them with adequate time, training and institutional support. The author's experience of designing age-specific Holistic Progress Card formats for Nursery, LKG, UKG and Grades 1 and 2, using selected curricular goals from the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage, offers a practical perspective on developmental assessment. While this experience relates to the Foundational Stage, it raises broader questions about how assessment can support learning as children progress through the school system.

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KEYWORDS: *National Education Policy 2020, secondary education, competency-based assessment, holistic development, teacher preparedness, experiential learning, Holistic Progress Card.*

1. INTRODUCTION

"The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught."

— Sri Aurobindo, *A System of National Education*

Education, in its true sense, is much more than the process of helping children acquire knowledge or prepare for examinations. It is about helping them understand the world around them, discover their abilities, develop sound values and gradually become independent thinkers. Every child comes to school with different experiences, interests, strengths and learning needs. Recognising these differences is an important responsibility of the education system. Schools must therefore look beyond the completion of the syllabus and consider whether children are genuinely learning, questioning, expressing themselves and growing in confidence.

India has made several efforts over the years to improve the quality and reach of education. Yet, in everyday school life, certain concerns continue to demand attention. Rote learning, examination pressure, curriculum overload and the limited connection between classroom knowledge and real-life situations remain important issues for educators. Teachers may invest considerable time in lesson planning, worksheets, activities and assessment, but the learning process can still become centred on the marks a child obtains. Marks have their place in education, but they cannot, by themselves, provide a complete picture of a learner's understanding,

creativity, effort, practical abilities or personal growth.

It is in this context that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 assumes significance. Approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020, the policy presents a broad vision for transforming school and higher education in India. It emphasises conceptual understanding, critical thinking, experiential learning, flexibility, inclusion and the holistic development of learners. Rather than treating education as the memorisation of information, it encourages a shift towards helping students understand concepts, apply their knowledge and develop competencies that are relevant to life beyond school (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy's proposed 5+3+3+4 curricular structure represents an important change in the way school education is organised. The Secondary Stage covers Grades 9–12, divided into two phases: Grades 9–10 and Grades 11–12. NEP 2020 envisages greater flexibility in subject choices, multidisciplinary learning, vocational exposure and assessment practices that place greater emphasis on competencies and higher-order thinking. These changes are particularly relevant during adolescence, when students deepen their academic understanding, explore their interests and begin to consider future educational and career pathways.

However, a policy's vision and its implementation are two different aspects of educational reform. As educators working in schools, we understand that meaningful learning depends not only on what is prescribed in a curriculum but also on how it is planned, taught, assessed and supported. A teacher may wish to introduce discussion, inquiry, collaborative work or experiential activities, but classroom strength, available time, the number of periods, syllabus expectations and administrative responsibilities can influence what is possible. Teachers therefore need more than new guidelines; they need adequate preparation, relevant professional development, time to plan and the support of school leadership.

Assessment is another important area that deserves careful consideration. Written examinations can help assess certain aspects of learning, but a single examination cannot capture every dimension of a student's development. A child may demonstrate understanding through an explanation, a practical task, a group activity or the ability to apply a concept in a new situation. Similarly, a low score may indicate a learning gap that needs attention rather than a lack of ability or potential. Assessment becomes more meaningful when it helps teachers identify what students have understood, where they need support and how teaching can be improved.

The emphasis on holistic development also invites educators to reflect on the atmosphere in which learning takes place. Children need opportunities to ask questions, express their views, make mistakes and learn from feedback without being discouraged by fear of failure. Teachers play a central role in creating such an environment. Their influence extends beyond the delivery of subject content to the relationships they build, the encouragement they offer and the example they set through their own conduct. At the same time, teachers need institutional support and realistic working conditions to fulfil these responsibilities effectively.

Drawing on official policy documents, curriculum frameworks, assessment guidance and relevant academic literature, this paper examines the historical development of educational reform leading to NEP 2020, its major provisions relevant to secondary education, and the opportunities and challenges associated with implementation. It also draws on the author's professional observations from school practice to reflect on assessment, teacher preparedness and learner-centred education. These observations are offered as practical reflections rather than as findings from a formal empirical study.

The central argument of this paper is that NEP 2020 provides an important framework for making secondary education more flexible, competency-oriented and responsive to the needs of learners. However, the success of this vision will depend on how consistently its principles are translated into classroom practice. Ultimately, educational reform must be judged not only by the policies introduced, but also by the quality of learning experiences children receive and the extent to which schools help them grow academically, socially, emotionally and ethically

2. HISTORY AND GROWTH OF NEP 2020

2.1. Historical development of educational policy in India

The development of NEP 2020 must be understood in the context of India's continuing efforts to expand educational access, establish common educational priorities and improve the quality of learning. Following independence, education became an important instrument for nation-building, social development and the promotion of democratic values. Policy initiatives increasingly focused on universal access, educational equity, teacher preparation, curriculum development and the relationship between education and national development.

The Education Policy of 1968 was an important national milestone. It drew upon the recommendations of the Education Commission of 1964–1966, chaired by D. S. Kothari, and articulated broad national priorities, including educational opportunity, national integration and the improvement of educational standards. It also supported the development of a common educational framework while recognising the importance of languages and the development of scientific knowledge.

The National Policy on Education 1986, subsequently modified in 1992, expanded attention to educational access, equality and quality. It addressed teacher education, early childhood care and education, vocational education, the needs of disadvantaged groups and the improvement of educational infrastructure. The accompanying Programme of Action provided a framework for translating policy objectives into implementation initiatives.

These earlier policies established important foundations for subsequent educational reform. Nevertheless, persistent concerns remained regarding uneven learning outcomes, differences in educational access, curriculum overload and the dominance of examination performance in many educational settings. Changes in society, technology, employment and the nature of knowledge further strengthened the need for a comprehensive review of educational priorities.

2.2. Curriculum reform and the movement towards learner-centred education

Educational policy development has been accompanied by changes in curriculum frameworks, pedagogical approaches and assessment practices. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 emphasised connecting knowledge to life outside school, reducing rote learning, enriching the curriculum beyond textbooks and creating opportunities for children to construct knowledge through meaningful experiences (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005).

This orientation contributed to a wider discussion about the purpose of school education. Learning was increasingly understood as a process requiring active participation, reflection, dialogue and application rather than the passive reproduction of information. The teacher's role consequently extended beyond explanation and delivery to include facilitation, observation, feedback and the creation of appropriate learning environments.

However, the adoption of learner-centred principles does not automatically transform classroom practice. Examination expectations, curriculum coverage requirements, available resources and established school routines may influence how much flexibility teachers can exercise. The relationship between educational philosophy and classroom realities therefore remained an important concern in subsequent reform discussions.

NEP 2020 builds on several of these earlier developments while presenting a more comprehensive vision of school education. It places particular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, developmental appropriateness, competency-based learning, multidisciplinary education, vocational exposure and holistic assessment.

2.3. Development and approval of NEP 2020

The development of NEP 2020 involved a national policy consultation and drafting process. The Committee for Draft National Education Policy, chaired by Dr. K. Kasturirangan, submitted its draft policy in 2019. Following further consideration and consultation, the Union Cabinet approved the National Education Policy 2020 on 29 July 2020. The policy replaced the National Policy on Education 1986, as modified in 1992. It seeks to address the needs of a diverse and changing society by connecting educational reform with equity, quality, access, accountability and the development of individual capabilities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

NEP 2020 is not merely a revision of school subjects or examination procedures. It presents an integrated vision involving curricular structure, pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, educational governance, technology and institutional development. Its implementation requires coordination among the Union Government, state governments, school boards, curriculum bodies, educational institutions and teachers. It is also important to distinguish policy approval from implementation. NEP 2020 provides recommendations and a broad direction for reform, while particular curriculum frameworks, guidelines, programmes and institutional decisions are developed or adopted through subsequent processes. The pace and form of implementation may vary according to institutional capacity, resources and the responsibilities of different educational authorities.

2.4. The 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure

One of the most visible provisions of NEP 2020 is the proposed 5+3+3+4 structure, which replaces the earlier 10+2 conceptualisation with a framework organised around developmental stages. The **Foundational Stage** comprises three years of preschool or Anganwadi education followed by

Grades 1 and 2. The **Preparatory Stage** covers Grades 3–5, the **Middle Stage** covers Grades 6–8, and the **Secondary Stage** covers Grades 9–12. This structure is intended to align teaching, learning and assessment with children's developmental needs. The Foundational Stage emphasises play-based and activity-based learning, language development, early numeracy, physical development and socio-emotional growth. The Preparatory Stage gradually introduces more formal learning while retaining activity-based approaches. The Middle Stage introduces greater disciplinary organisation alongside experiential learning and exploration. The Secondary Stage encourages deeper conceptual understanding, multidisciplinary study and greater flexibility in subject choices.

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCERT, 2022) and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCERT, 2023) provide more detailed curricular guidance associated with the policy's vision. These frameworks help connect broad policy recommendations with learning goals, pedagogy, curriculum content and assessment. The new structure therefore represents more than an administrative reorganisation. It seeks to establish continuity between developmental stages and ensure that educational experiences respond more appropriately to the needs of learners at different ages.

2.5. Major provisions relevant to secondary education

NEP 2020 identifies several priorities that have direct implications for Grades 9–12.

First, it promotes conceptual understanding and competency development over rote memorisation. Students should be able to explain ideas, apply knowledge, solve problems and use what they learn in unfamiliar situations. This requires teaching methods and assessment tasks that extend beyond the recall of textbook information.

Second, the policy advocates greater flexibility in subject selection. It seeks to reduce rigid divisions between arts, humanities, sciences, vocational subjects and co-curricular activities. Such flexibility can provide opportunities for students to explore interests and connect different areas of knowledge, subject to the curricular and institutional arrangements available.

Third, NEP 2020 encourages experiential learning, inquiry, discussion, projects and practical application. These approaches are intended to help students connect theoretical concepts with real-life contexts and develop independent thinking.

Fourth, the policy proposes assessment reforms that emphasise formative assessment, higher-order skills and a more comprehensive understanding of student progress. It also envisages changes to Board examinations so that they assess core competencies and reduce the pressure associated with high-stakes testing.

Fifth, the policy recognises teachers as central to educational transformation. Professional development, appropriate working conditions, institutional support and opportunities for collaboration are essential if teachers are to adopt new approaches effectively.

Together, these provisions establish a broader understanding of secondary education. Academic achievement remains important, but it is expected to develop alongside practical competence, critical thinking, ethical awareness, creativity and preparation for further education and life.

2.6. Growth of assessment reform and the role of PARAKH

Assessment reform is a significant component of NEP 2020. The policy identifies the need to move away from assessments dominated by rote memorisation towards methods that evaluate understanding, application and the development of competencies. The policy proposes the establishment of PARAKH, the Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development, as a national assessment standard-setting body. PARAKH is intended to support the development of assessment standards and encourage school boards to align their assessment practices with the policy's educational objectives.

The Holistic Progress Card (HPC) is one initiative associated with this wider approach. PARAKH describes HPCs for the Foundational, Preparatory, Middle and Secondary Stages. These frameworks seek to provide a broader picture of learner progress through evidence drawn from multiple curricular elements and competency-based activities (PARAKH, n.d.). The significance of this development lies in the distinction between assessment as a final judgement and assessment as an ongoing process of understanding and supporting learning. When teachers observe learners, document progress and provide constructive feedback, assessment can inform decisions about teaching and identify areas where additional support is needed. The development of stage-specific assessment approaches also recognises that a single reporting format may not adequately reflect the different developmental and curricular requirements of learners across school stages. However, the practical value of holistic

assessment depends on the quality of evidence collected, the clarity of assessment criteria, teachers' professional judgement and the time available for meaningful documentation.

Thus, the history and growth of NEP 2020 reflect an evolving educational agenda: from expanding access and establishing national priorities towards a stronger emphasis on developmental appropriateness, competency-based learning, multidisciplinary education and holistic assessment. Its long-term significance will depend on the extent to which these ideas become sustainable practices in schools.

3. IMPACT OF NEP 2020 ON SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

3.1. Transforming assessment and examination practices

One of the most important, intended impacts of NEP 2020 is a change in how student achievement is understood and assessed. In examination-oriented environments, marks may become the dominant means of communicating academic performance. Although examinations provide useful information about particular forms of achievement, a single score cannot fully represent a learner's understanding, creativity, practical abilities or progress over time. The policy's emphasis on formative and competency-based assessment encourages teachers to gather evidence through varied methods, including written responses, projects, discussions, practical tasks and classroom participation. Such methods can provide a more differentiated understanding of student learning when they are aligned with clearly defined competencies.

The author's professional experience includes designing age-specific Holistic Progress Card formats for Balvatika and Grades 1 and 2, using selected curricular goals from the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage. This work involved considering developmental expectations and using assessment descriptors to communicate learning progress. It illustrates the practical importance of aligning assessment formats with learner needs, although it does not establish the effectiveness of HPC practices in secondary education.

For secondary schools, the relevant question is how similar principles can be adapted to subject-specific learning and the increasing academic demands of Grades 9–12. Teachers need clear assessment criteria, appropriate tasks, manageable documentation processes and sufficient professional support. Assessment reform is unlikely to succeed if new rubrics simply add to existing paperwork without improving feedback or instructional decisions.

3.2. Teacher preparedness and professional well-being

Teachers are central to the implementation of NEP 2020 because changes in curriculum and assessment ultimately require changes in classroom practice. Teachers must understand the purpose of competency-based learning, design suitable learning experiences, assess diverse forms of student achievement and respond to individual learning needs. Professional development therefore needs to extend beyond one-time workshops. Teachers require opportunities to study curriculum frameworks, discuss practical examples, collaborate with colleagues, examine student work and reflect on the effectiveness of their methods. Schools also need to provide sufficient planning time and constructive academic leadership.

From the author's professional observations, teacher readiness involves more than completing lesson plans and preparing worksheets. Physical energy, emotional well-being, confidence and the availability of institutional support may influence a teacher's capacity to create meaningful learning experiences. Teachers also work within varied personal and professional circumstances, which should be recognised without making assumptions about individuals on the basis of gender or family responsibilities.

The concern is particularly relevant when new expectations are introduced without adequate preparation or time for adaptation. Effective implementation requires realistic timelines, accessible training, opportunities to clarify expectations and feedback on the challenges teachers encounter. Teacher development should be treated as an ongoing process rather than an additional administrative requirement.

3.3. Experiential learning and classroom realities

NEP 2020 advocates experiential learning, inquiry, interdisciplinary connections and the application of knowledge to real-life situations. These approaches can help students understand concepts more deeply and develop skills relevant to further learning and everyday life.

However, implementing experiential pedagogy in secondary classrooms can be challenging. Teachers may need to cover extensive syllabi, manage heterogeneous groups of learners, conduct assessments, maintain documentation and participate in co-curricular activities. A lesson period of limited duration may not always allow sufficient time for inquiry, discussion, experimentation, reflection and feedback. These challenges do not invalidate

experiential learning. Rather, they highlight the importance of appropriate planning, curriculum prioritisation, resource availability and flexible teaching strategies. Experiential activities need not always involve elaborate projects or expensive materials; structured discussions, case studies, demonstrations, problem-solving tasks and locally relevant investigations may also provide meaningful learning opportunities.

School leaders can support implementation by protecting collaborative planning time, encouraging teachers to share resources and ensuring that professional development addresses actual classroom constraints. The effectiveness of reform should be judged not by the number of activities conducted, but by the quality of student engagement and the evidence of learning they generate.

3.4. Emotional safety, reflection and holistic development

The educational purpose of secondary schooling extends beyond academic attainment. Adolescents are developing their identities, relationships, emotional regulation and capacity for independent decision-making. A supportive classroom environment can help students participate, ask questions, acknowledge difficulties and engage constructively with feedback. From a practitioner perspective, the teacher's ability to listen, acknowledge student experiences and respond with empathy is an important consideration in learner-centred education. Opportunities to express ideas, practise skills, make mistakes and reflect on feedback can contribute to a classroom culture in which learning is treated as a developmental process.

The author's school follows a routine of beginning and ending the day with a minute of silence, inspired by practices associated with Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the Divine Mother. The intention is to provide a pause for quiet reflection before learning begins and before students leave for the day. This is a school-level practice rather than a prescribed requirement of NEP 2020.

Such routines may be explored as examples of how schools create space for reflection and a calm transition between activities. However, claims that they reduce anxiety, improve attention or increase gratitude require suitable empirical evidence. Their educational value should be examined through careful observation and, where appropriate, systematic evaluation. The broader implication is that holistic development requires attention to the everyday culture of schools, not only to curriculum documents and formal assessment structures. Student well-being, respectful relationships and opportunities for reflection can complement academic learning, provided they are implemented sensitively and inclusively.

3.5. Implementation challenges and the way forward

The impact of NEP 2020 on secondary education depends on several interacting conditions. These include teacher preparedness, curriculum and timetable design, the availability of learning resources, school leadership, parental expectations and the capacity of educational institutions to adapt assessment practices. A further challenge is the difference between adopting a policy recommendation and demonstrating its educational impact. Introducing a competency-based question paper, for example, does not by itself establish that students have developed stronger conceptual understanding. Similarly, introducing a holistic reporting format does not guarantee that the information will be used to improve teaching.

Implementation therefore requires continuous monitoring, professional dialogue and evidence-informed decision-making. Schools should examine whether students receive meaningful feedback, whether teachers can act on assessment evidence, whether different learning needs are addressed and whether new practices are feasible within available resources. Educational authorities and school boards can contribute by communicating changes clearly, providing suitable training, allowing time for adaptation and ensuring coherence between curriculum expectations and assessment requirements. School leaders can support teachers through collaborative planning, manageable documentation, mentoring and opportunities to evaluate classroom practices.

Ultimately, the impact of NEP 2020 should be examined through both the opportunities it creates and the challenges that emerge during implementation. A balanced understanding requires attention to policy intentions, actual practices and evidence of outcomes rather than assuming that either success or failure follows automatically from the policy's introduction.

4. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 marks an important stage in the continuing evolution of school education in India. Building on earlier educational policies and curriculum reforms, it calls for a shift towards conceptual understanding, competency development, flexibility, experiential learning and holistic assessment. Its vision offers an opportunity to reconsider not only what students learn, but also how learning takes place and what education should ultimately help them become. The words of the

Divine Mother, Mirra Alfassa, offer a meaningful reflection on this purpose:

"We study to learn, to know, to understand the world, and for the sake of the joy that it gives us."

— The Mother, *Guidance on Education* (June 1967).

This thought reminds us that learning should not become merely a means of securing marks, certificates or future employment. These outcomes have their place, but education has a much wider purpose. **What we learn is certainly important, but how we learn is equally, if not more, important.** Education is not simply a product to be measured at the end of a term; it is a continuous process through which a child develops understanding, confidence, curiosity, values and the ability to learn from experience. The process matters because the habits and attitudes children develop through learning continue to influence them long after they leave school.

Today, information is widely available through digital platforms and online resources. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to provide students with more information, but to help them understand it, question it, connect it with their experiences and use it responsibly. Education must engage the mind, but it must also nurture growing minds. Children need opportunities to think independently, communicate their ideas, work with others, learn from mistakes and remain open to new possibilities. Such development calls for sensitivity towards the changing needs of learners and a willingness among educators to reflect, adapt and improve their practices.

The professional observations discussed in this paper also highlight the importance of looking beyond marks when understanding a learner's progress. Developmentally appropriate assessment, careful observation and constructive feedback can help teachers recognise both a child's achievements and the areas where further support is needed. The author's experience of designing Holistic Progress Card formats for the Foundational Stage illustrates one practical effort to connect assessment with children's developmental goals. Although this experience relates to the early years of schooling, it raises an important question for the wider education system: how can assessment continue to support learning and development as children move into the middle and secondary stages?

Realising the vision of NEP 2020, however, requires more than changes in curriculum documents or assessment formats. Teachers need time to prepare, opportunities for meaningful professional development, appropriate resources and supportive working conditions. School leaders must help create an environment in which teachers can try new approaches, reflect on their effectiveness and respond to diverse learning needs. Policy expectations must also be considered alongside the realities of classroom strength, instructional time, examination requirements and the responsibilities teachers manage every day. Change becomes meaningful when educators are prepared and supported to put it into practice, rather than simply expected to adopt new procedures.

For secondary education in particular, the challenge is to prepare students for higher education, employment and responsible participation in society without reducing learning to examination performance alone. Academic achievement remains important, but it should develop alongside critical thinking, creativity, emotional maturity, ethical awareness and a willingness to continue learning throughout life.

Ultimately, the success of NEP 2020 will depend on the extent to which its principles become part of everyday educational practice. Policymakers, school leaders, teachers, families and communities all have a role in this journey. The true measure of educational reform is not simply whether new systems have been introduced, but whether children are given meaningful opportunities to learn, question, discover and grow. If education helps every learner develop not only knowledge, but also the confidence, sensitivity and curiosity to keep learning throughout life, then the purpose of reform will have begun to find its fullest expression.

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