14.0 Role of NEP 2020 in Strengthening Foundational Learning and Quality Education at the Primary Level

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has redefined the landscape of school education in India by prioritizing foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) as the most urgent and essential learning goal. By introducing the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, the policy recognizes the critical importance of the early years (ages 3–8) in shaping a child's cognitive and academic development. This theoretical paper explores the role of NEP 2020 in enhancing foundational learning and ensuring quality primary education through inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and play-based pedagogical reforms. It examines key policy provisions such as mother tongue instruction, teacher capacity building, formative assessments, and the integration of ECCE with primary schooling. Through a review of educational theories and policy literature, the paper highlights how NEP 2020 seeks to bridge historical gaps and promote equity and excellence in the foundational stages. It concludes with insights into implementation challenges and recommendations for sustainable systemic transformation.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, Foundational Learning, Primary Education and Quality Education*

Introduction

The foundational stage of education is increasingly being recognized as the cornerstone of a child's lifelong learning trajectory. In India, where a large percentage of children struggle to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills by Grade 3, the urgency to reform early education is critical. Recognizing this need, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has brought foundational learning to the forefront of the national agenda, signaling a paradigm shift from rote-based learning to experiential, competency-based education. The policy's emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), inclusive pedagogy, and localized, multilingual instruction reflects a comprehensive vision for strengthening primary education. These efforts are not only aligned with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 but also rooted in the indigenous needs of diverse learner groups across India.

Historically, India's education system has struggled with ensuring equitable access to quality primary education, despite the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 mandating free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years. However, learning outcome reports such as ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) have consistently indicated significant deficits in foundational literacy and numeracy (Pratham, 2019). This has prompted policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to revisit the foundational years with renewed focus. The NEP 2020, in this context, is viewed as a timely intervention. It restructures the

school education system through a 5+3+3+4 framework that dedicates the first five years to foundational learning, covering children in the 3–8 years age group. This alignment with developmental psychology and neuroscience forms a strong theoretical and practical base for the reforms proposed.

Several studies underscore the importance of quality education in the early years for long-term academic and life success. Heckman (2006) argued that investments in early learning yield higher returns than later interventions, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The NEP 2020 draws from such research, advocating for an integrated and play-based curriculum during the foundational stage. It proposes a National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE), guided by child development principles and responsive to cultural and linguistic diversity. Literature by Kaul and Bhattacharjea (2021) supports this approach, suggesting that contextualized and developmentally appropriate instruction in the early grades significantly boosts cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development in young learners.

Moreover, the NEP 2020 highlights the role of mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction in the primary years, in line with UNESCO recommendations and sociolinguistic research. Studies show that children learn better when taught in a language they understand (Ball, 2011). This policy shift addresses India's multilingual reality and aims to reduce cognitive overload, thereby enhancing conceptual understanding. It also facilitates smoother transitions to formal schooling, especially for children in rural and tribal areas. Furthermore, the policy calls for bridging the gap between pre-primary and Grade 1, recognizing that continuity and coherence across the early years are essential for ensuring retention and effective learning. The integration of Anganwadi centers with primary schools, as proposed, is expected to bring structural and pedagogical continuity in children's learning journeys.

The policy also places strong emphasis on teacher training and capacity building. The quality of teaching in the foundational years has a profound impact on student outcomes, and NEP 2020 acknowledges this by recommending specialized training modules, professional standards, and continuous professional development for early grade educators. Literature by Kingdon and Banerji (2020) affirms that teacher quality is among the most significant determinants of student achievement in primary education. The use of technology for teacher training (e.g., DIKSHA platform), regular mentoring, and improved pupil-teacher ratios are some of the mechanisms proposed to improve classroom processes. Additionally, NEP 2020 advocates for developmentally appropriate assessment systems that rely more on formative, observation-based tools rather than summative, exam-centric evaluations—thus creating a more child-friendly learning environment.

Concept of Foundational Learning

Foundational learning refers to the essential building blocks of education that enable young learners to acquire basic skills in literacy and numeracy during the early years of schooling. It encompasses a child's ability to read with understanding, perform basic mathematical operations, and develop cognitive, socio-emotional, and motor skills necessary

for future academic success. According to UNESCO (2022), foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) are considered prerequisites for meaningful participation in education and lifelong learning. The importance of FLN lies in its impact on reducing school dropouts, increasing retention, and ensuring equitable access to further learning opportunities. Without acquiring these foundational skills, children are at a higher risk of falling behind and being excluded from the benefits of education.

Globally, benchmarks for foundational learning have been established to track early grade progress. For instance, the World Bank's Learning Poverty metric estimates the percentage of 10-year-olds unable to read and comprehend age-appropriate texts. In India, the ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) has revealed persistent deficits in basic reading and arithmetic skills among primary school students, especially in rural areas (Pratham, 2019). Effective foundational learning involves learner-centered pedagogy, age-appropriate content, formative assessments, and early childhood stimulation. The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2021) emphasizes the need for national governments to invest in ECCE and early primary education to improve FLN outcomes. These global frameworks provide a strong rationale for India's policy shift under NEP 2020 to prioritize foundational learning at the core of its educational reforms.

Primary Education in India

Primary education in India has evolved through various national efforts and policies. The post-independence period witnessed significant milestones such as the Kothari Commission (1964–66), which emphasized universalization of elementary education, and Operation Blackboard (1987), which aimed to improve primary school infrastructure. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in the 1990s and early 2000s expanded access to education, focusing on enrolment, gender parity, and infrastructure development. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, guaranteed free and compulsory education to children aged 6–14 years. However, despite these policies, improvements in learning outcomes remained limited, and the focus often leaned more toward input-based indicators rather than outcome-based quality education. Persistent challenges have included low learning levels, high pupil-teacher ratios, inadequate teacher training, and minimal use of mother tongue instruction. Reports like ASER (Pratham, 2018) indicated that even after five years of schooling, many children lacked basic reading and arithmetic skills. Additionally, early grade education was often neglected in both curriculum design and teacher preparation programs.

A disconnect between ECCE and primary education, lack of age-appropriate pedagogy, and poor assessment practices further contributed to learning gaps. Scholars such as Kingdon (2020) argue that without focusing on foundational competencies, subsequent investments in upper primary and secondary education will yield limited returns. Therefore, the NEP 2020 emerged as a crucial reform to address these systemic shortcomings through a comprehensive overhaul of foundational and primary education.

NEP 2020 and Foundational Learning

NEP 2020 places foundational learning at the heart of educational transformation in India. The policy introduces the 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure, where the

first five years—comprising three years of preschool and Grades 1–2—form the foundational stage. This stage emphasizes play-based, activity-centered, and inquiry-driven pedagogy aligned with the developmental needs of children aged 3 to 8 years. The policy mandates the development of the National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) by NCERT, focusing on flexible, multilingual, and learner-centered instruction. It promotes the use of mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, which is supported by research indicating better comprehension and retention when taught in a familiar language (Ball, 2011).

Another significant provision is the integration of ECCE with primary education through coordination between Anganwadis and schools. The policy also advocates for foundational literacy and numeracy to become a national mission—leading to the launch of NIPUN Bharat in 2021. NEP 2020 stresses the importance of foundational assessments, moving away from high-stakes testing toward formative, competency-based evaluations. Teacher education reforms under NEP include the creation of the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) and continuous professional development with a focus on early grade instruction. Moreover, the policy recommends reducing curriculum content to its core essentials to allow space for critical thinking, creativity, and application-based learning. These reforms collectively aim to ensure that every child in Grade 3 achieves foundational learning outcomes by 2026–27.

5+3+3+4 Framework and Its Relevance to Early Childhood and Primary Education

The NEP 2020 introduces a significant restructuring of the school education system through the 5+3+3+4 framework, replacing the earlier 10+2 structure. The first five years (3 years of pre-primary and Grades 1–2) form the foundational stage, followed by preparatory (Grades 3–5), middle (Grades 6–8), and secondary stages (Grades 9–12). This reorganization is grounded in child development science, ensuring that pedagogical practices are aligned with children's cognitive and socio-emotional growth. The foundational stage particularly emphasizes play-based and activity-based learning, critical for developing foundational literacy and numeracy. This restructured model addresses the historical gap between ECCE and formal schooling, ensuring that learning continuity begins from the early years and is developmentally appropriate (NEP, 2020).

Educational experts have long advocated for such alignment. According to Kaul and Bhattacharjea (2021), early learning must consider the age and stage of each child, and this framework provides the structural base for it. Globally, UNICEF (2019) underscores that early childhood education must transition smoothly into primary education through consistent curriculum and teaching approaches. In the Indian context, children from marginalized communities often enter Grade 1 without preschool exposure, making this integration critical. The 5+3+3+4 framework provides a unified structure where pre-primary and primary education are no longer isolated but form a cohesive learning continuum. This helps reduce dropout rates and enhances readiness for academic learning, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and equity.

Pedagogical Innovations and Play-Based Learning in NEP 2020

A core component of NEP 2020 is its focus on transforming pedagogy by moving away from rote learning toward constructivist, experiential methods. For the foundational and preparatory stages, the policy strongly recommends play-based, activity-driven, and inquiry-oriented teaching approaches. This aligns with educational psychology theories, such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky, which emphasize learning through interaction and discovery. The policy encourages the use of stories, games, rhymes, puzzles, and outdoor activities to help children build cognitive and socio-emotional skills organically. Such methodologies promote creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking from an early age (NEP, 2020).

Evidence from research supports the benefits of play-based pedagogy. Lillard et al. (2013) highlight that children who engage in structured play and hands-on learning activities in early education show better attention span, academic motivation, and conceptual understanding. Similarly, Rao et al. (2017) found that activity-based approaches in low-resource settings improved early learning outcomes. NEP 2020 proposes teacher training modules and the development of resource materials under this framework, ensuring that even government school teachers in rural areas can apply these innovative strategies. The use of local context in learning activities also fosters cultural relevance and inclusion. This pedagogical shift aims to create learning environments that are joyful, meaningful, and developmentally suitable for young learners across diverse Indian settings.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education and Inclusive Learning

One of the most debated but educationally grounded provisions in NEP 2020 is the use of the mother tongue or home language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8. This policy is supported by a substantial body of global and Indian research which suggests that children learn best in a language they understand. The use of the mother tongue not only enhances comprehension but also boosts confidence and reduces dropout rates. According to Ball (2011), multilingual education in early grades significantly improves foundational literacy outcomes, especially for children from marginalized communities. NEP 2020 also acknowledges the importance of India's linguistic diversity and recommends flexible implementation respecting regional realities.

From an inclusion perspective, mother tongue-based instruction creates equitable learning opportunities, particularly for first-generation learners and tribal students. Literature by Mohanty (2019) emphasizes that dominant-language instruction has historically marginalized non-dominant linguistic groups, contributing to poor learning and alienation. NEP 2020 addresses this by integrating multilingualism, allowing gradual transition to second and third languages through a well-defined multilingual framework. This also aligns with cognitive research that suggests multilingual learners often exhibit better executive functioning and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2009). Hence, by rooting instruction in languages familiar to children, the NEP not only promotes academic success but also fosters cultural pride and social cohesion.

Teacher Training and Capacity Building Under NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 emphasizes that the quality of education cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, making teacher training and professional development a central pillar of foundational learning reform. The policy introduces the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) to define key competencies, ethics, and performance benchmarks for educators across career stages. Additionally, NEP recommends the development of a new National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) aligned with the curricular reforms in school education, especially for early childhood and primary teachers. It mandates all teacher education programs to be four-year integrated degrees by 2030, strengthening pedagogical knowledge and multidisciplinary understanding (NEP, 2020). These reforms aim to ensure that teachers are equipped not only with subject content but also with inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and technology-enabled teaching strategies.

Digital tools also play a vital role in teacher capacity building under NEP 2020. The use of platforms such as DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) and NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement) allows for accessible, scalable, and self-paced professional learning. According to the World Bank (2021), integrating digital resources in teacher training significantly enhances pedagogical skills and promotes reflective practices. Research by Banerjee and Duflo (2020) also supports the notion that targeted teacher training, when supported by monitoring and incentives, improves classroom instruction and student outcomes. NEP envisions a continuous professional development model in which teachers receive at least 50 hours of training annually. These steps collectively aim to transform the classroom into a dynamic, child-centered environment that nurtures foundational skills.

Integration of NIPUN Bharat Mission with NEP 2020 Objectives

The NIPUN Bharat Mission (2021) is a major initiative designed to operationalize the foundational literacy and numeracy goals outlined in NEP 2020. The mission aims to ensure that every child in India attains grade-level competencies in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic by the end of Grade 3, preferably by 2026–27. It offers a roadmap for states and union territories to implement structured, time-bound, and outcome-oriented action plans, including teacher training, community participation, learning materials, and FLN-focused assessments. By aligning closely with NEP's vision, NIPUN Bharat provides the institutional framework necessary to address the foundational learning crisis across diverse schooling contexts in India (MoE, 2021).

The synergy between NEP and NIPUN Bharat is critical for sustainable educational transformation. Both emphasize inclusivity, learner-centric pedagogy, and measurable learning outcomes. Scholars like Kaul and Bhattacharjea (2021) note that successful implementation of foundational learning reforms requires coherence across policies, institutions, and local governance structures. The mission's emphasis on capacity-building, data-driven decision-making, and decentralized planning reflects NEP's larger goals of autonomy and accountability in the education system. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, early models of NIPUN Bharat implementation have shown promising results in

FLN improvement (NCERT, 2022). The policy convergence between NEP and NIPUN Bharat thus creates a unified direction, ensuring that foundational learning is no longer a neglected stage but a national educational priority.

Assessment Reforms and Learning Outcome Measurement

One of the transformative aspects of NEP 2020 is its vision to shift from summative, memory-based evaluations to formative and competency-based assessments, particularly in the foundational and primary stages. Traditional exams often fail to capture the holistic development and learning trajectories of young learners. NEP recommends assessments that are diagnostic in nature and support individualized learning paths. This aligns with global practices where learning progressions and continuous feedback are used to improve instruction and identify gaps early (OECD, 2018). NEP also encourages schools to develop a portfolio of student work, conduct regular progress reports, and employ playful and oral-based assessment methods in early grades.

Supporting this, the Performance Grading Index (PGI) and the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Index introduced by the Ministry of Education serve as national benchmarks to monitor state-level progress. The NIPUN Bharat guidelines also provide detailed learning outcomes for each grade and subject area. According to Kingdon (2020), aligning assessments with foundational competencies helps shift the education system's focus from schooling to learning. Additionally, the use of technology through tools like NAS (National Achievement Survey) and the upcoming PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) aims to standardize learning metrics across states. These reforms ensure that assessments are not high-stakes judgments but developmental tools that inform pedagogical planning and classroom practices.

Community Participation and Home-School Linkages

Community participation and parental involvement are critical pillars in NEP 2020's vision for foundational learning. The policy strongly emphasizes collaboration between parents, local bodies, and schools to enhance learning outcomes in early grades. Active engagement of parents in children's education can lead to improved motivation, attendance, and academic achievement. NEP 2020 calls for School Management Committees (SMCs), local governance, and village education plans to promote ownership and accountability at the grassroots level. Parental awareness programs, home-based learning support, and feedback mechanisms are encouraged to ensure learning continuity beyond the classroom. Studies by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) have shown that parental involvement in early years significantly impacts children's language and cognitive development. Similarly, Jha and Parvati (2010) noted that decentralized planning and community participation improved access and retention in marginalized settings in India.

Furthermore, local community structures, including Anganwadi workers and Panchayati Raj Institutions, are expected to play a facilitative role in early learning environments. The NEP links community participation with inclusive education by urging schools to be responsive to the needs of tribal, linguistic, and socio-economically diverse

populations. Research by Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010) highlights how school-community partnerships have bridged the communication gap between educators and parents, especially in rural India. Tools like the NIPUN Bharat dashboards and real-time monitoring systems provide platforms for local stakeholders to review progress and contribute actively. The alignment of home-school efforts ensures that foundational literacy and numeracy become collective goals, embedded in local culture and household practices.

Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Foundational Learning Reforms

Foundational learning as conceptualized in NEP 2020 is rooted in well-established developmental and constructivist theories of learning. Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development emphasize that early childhood is a period of concrete thinking, where children learn best through hands-on experiences and sensory exploration. NEP's push for play-based, activity-driven learning reflects this understanding. Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, particularly his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), underscores the importance of guided learning and social interaction. This aligns with NEP's recommendation for peer learning and scaffolding by teachers to ensure equitable learning progression for all students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds (Vygotsky, 1978).

Jerome Bruner's spiral curriculum theory further supports the idea that foundational knowledge should be built through iterative and age-appropriate reinforcement. He emphasizes discovery learning, which is at the core of NEP 2020's experiential pedagogy. According to Bruner (1960), learning is most effective when learners are actively involved in constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving information. This theoretical foundation is extended through constructivist pedagogy, which emphasizes learners' agency, contextual relevance, and intrinsic motivation. Studies by Ackermann (2001) and Fosnot (2005) validate that constructivist approaches lead to deeper understanding, better retention, and long-term academic success in foundational years. NEP's theoretical grounding enables the policy to move away from rote memorization and embrace developmentally aligned, inclusive, and child-centered educational practices.

Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing NEP 2020 at the Primary Level

NEP 2020 presents an unprecedented opportunity to redefine the foundation of the Indian education system through evidence-based, inclusive, and child-friendly approaches. With provisions such as the 5+3+3+4 structure, early language instruction, continuous assessments, and digital learning, the policy creates an enabling framework for foundational reform. It is complemented by flagship initiatives like the NIPUN Bharat Mission and the use of EdTech platforms like DIKSHA and NISHTHA for capacity building. States such as Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh have already initiated contextual implementation strategies, indicating the feasibility of NEP goals when aligned with local governance and planning (NCERT, 2022). These structural changes offer the possibility to transform the teaching-learning ecosystem in primary classrooms across India.

However, the road to implementation is fraught with significant challenges. First, the policy-practice gap remains wide due to disparities in infrastructure, qualified teacher availability, and administrative will. Many rural schools lack basic facilities or trained teachers to deliver activity-based foundational learning. The digital divide is another major obstacle; while NEP encourages the use of technology, a large segment of children, particularly in rural and tribal areas, do not have access to smartphones or the internet. Moreover, teacher shortages, rigid bureaucratic systems, and socio-economic barriers hinder inclusive education. As Singh (2021) notes, unless there is sufficient investment in capacity building and equity-focused planning, the transformative vision of NEP may remain unrealized. Thus, while NEP 2020 sets a strong policy agenda, it must be backed by rigorous execution and sustained monitoring to address these challenges effectively.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The successful implementation of NEP 2020's foundational learning agenda requires sustained policy commitment, inter-sectoral coordination, and long-term investment. A key implication is the need for increased public funding specifically earmarked for early childhood and primary education. This includes strengthening Anganwadi centres, recruiting and training ECCE professionals, and providing culturally relevant teaching-learning materials. The policy also underscores the necessity of integrated monitoring systems such as PARAKH for outcome-based evaluation. States must build capacity to interpret and act upon data to inform instruction and remediation. The convergence of education with nutrition, health, and social protection is essential to address the multi-dimensional nature of early childhood development. According to Heckman (2006), early interventions yield the highest returns when they are comprehensive and sustained, particularly for disadvantaged children.

Looking ahead, future policy directions must focus on sustainability, scalability, and context-sensitivity. Educational planning must be decentralized, allowing for district-level innovation while ensuring fidelity to national goals. Cross-sectoral collaboration with ministries of health, women and child development, and Panchayati Raj can enhance the reach and impact of foundational learning programs. Furthermore, community ownership and teacher autonomy should be embedded into implementation frameworks. Research and innovation centers focusing on foundational learning should be established to evaluate interventions, share best practices, and inform continuous policy improvement. NEP 2020 offers a visionary blueprint; however, its transformative potential can only be realized through adaptive, inclusive, and equity-driven action at every level of the education system.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 presents a transformative opportunity to reshape India’s primary education system by placing foundational learning at the center of educational reform. By introducing a developmentally appropriate 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, promoting activity-based and multilingual education, and integrating early childhood care and education into the formal schooling framework, NEP 2020 addresses long-standing gaps in the delivery of quality education. The emphasis on teacher training, inclusive pedagogy, competency-based assessments, and community participation lays the groundwork for an education system that is equitable, accessible, and responsive to the

cognitive and socio-emotional needs of young learners. The alignment of NIPUN Bharat with NEP 2020 goals further reinforces the national commitment to achieving foundational literacy and numeracy for all children by Grade 3, marking a shift from input-based schooling to outcome-based learning.

However, the success of these visionary reforms depends on the extent to which policy is translated into effective classroom practice. Persistent challenges such as uneven resource allocation, digital inequality, teacher shortages, and capacity gaps at the local level pose risks to the implementation process. Therefore, sustained political will, cross-sectoral coordination, decentralized planning, and continuous professional development for educators are essential to realize the full potential of NEP 2020. Moreover, fostering strong home-school linkages, investing in research and innovation, and maintaining robust monitoring systems will ensure the long-term sustainability of foundational learning reforms. As India progresses toward its educational goals, the foundational stage must not be seen in isolation but as a critical investment for national development, social equity, and lifelong learning. With committed efforts at every level—from policymakers to parents—NEP 2020 can be the cornerstone of a truly inclusive and quality-driven primary education system.

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