



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ECCE IMPLEMENTATION: NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020 PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The Government of India's New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformational shift in the education system by introducing formal education from the foundational stage, starting at LKG and UKG, rather than from Class 1. This paper critically examines the challenges, opportunities, and management strategies involved in executing this decision. This paper analyzes government readiness, teacher recruitment, curriculum development, infrastructural needs, and societal response. Finally, the paper proposes actionable recommendations and concludes with the potential long-term impact on India's educational ecosystem.

Keywords: *Infrastructure, Curriculum, Teacher, Recruitment, Development, Budget*

Introduction

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 initiated by the Government of India aims at overhauling the country's education system to make it more inclusive and comprehensive. One of its landmark decisions is to start formal education at the foundational stage, beginning with LKG and UKG before Class 1. Earlier, formal government schooling commenced directly from Class 1, leaving early childhood education largely to private or informal setups. The scope of this study is to examine the implementation challenges, Copyright © 2025, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

societal reactions, and emerging opportunities from this policy shift.

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a revolutionary framework aiming to overhaul the Indian education system. Approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, NEP 2020 replaces the National Policy on Education of 1986 and introduces sweeping changes across all educational stages (Ministry of Education, 2020). A central vision of NEP 2020 is to universalize education from preschool to secondary level, ensuring every child has access to quality schooling. One of the fundamental shifts is the restructuring of the curriculum framework into a 5+3+3+4 design, emphasizing foundational literacy and numeracy in the early years.

According to the policy document, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is now recognized as critical for lifelong learning and development. The policy sets the target of achieving universal access to quality ECCE by 2030. This emphasis aligns with international best practices that view ages 3-8 as crucial for cognitive, emotional, and social development (UNICEF, 2019). The NEP 2020 envisions an integrated foundational stage consisting of three years of preschool (ages 3-6) and two years of early primary (Classes 1 and 2).

Furthermore, the policy recognizes the gaps in early education provisions, especially for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. It outlines a vision to strengthen Anganwadi centers, develop a National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE), and train teachers specifically for the foundational stage (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Historically, formal education in India's government schools commenced from Class 1, typically when children were six years old. Early childhood education was largely informal, managed through Anganwadis or private preschools. This fragmented system led to disparities in school readiness, particularly disadvantaging children from low-income families who lacked access to quality preschool education (Kaul, 2019).

NEP 2020 disrupts this pattern by integrating pre-primary levels (LKG and UKG) into the formal schooling system. Under the new 5+3+3+4 structure, the foundational stage now encompasses three years of pre-primary education followed by Classes 1 and 2, covering ages 3 to 8. This shift mandates government schools to start enrolling children from LKG onwards and to provide structured, curriculum-based early education (Ministry of Education, 2020).

This transition has multiple implications:

Curriculum: A standardized curriculum aligned with the National Education Policy's goals must be developed and implemented across all government schools.

Teacher Recruitment: Qualified teachers trained in early childhood education pedagogy are essential.

Infrastructure: Age-appropriate facilities, including classrooms, sanitation, and play areas, need to be established.

By formalizing LKG and UKG in government schools, NEP 2020 aims to reduce inequities in access to early education and improve learning outcomes. According to UNICEF (2019), children who attend quality early childhood programs perform better in primary school and beyond. Integrating LKG and UKG ensures that all children, regardless of socio-economic status, start their educational journey on an equal footing.

Purpose and scope of the study

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the implementation challenges and opportunities arising from the inclusion of the foundational stage (LKG and UKG) into India's government school system under NEP 2020. While the policy provides a visionary roadmap, its execution poses significant practical hurdles that need detailed examination.

Background

Evolution of early childhood education in India Universal early childhood education in India is a relatively recent development. Throughout the history of India, formal education was limited to only male members of the high caste groups. Mass illiteracy among children of low caste families and female children has had a cumulative effect of unequal distribution of educational opportunities among the population. The conscious and systematic attempt to educate children from all sections of the society began in 1937 with the educational philosophy of Gandhi. Gandhi's basic education scheme was designed to set up free and compulsory education at the national level. Maria Montessori's 1939 visit to India implanted the foundations of preschool education in India and teachers were trained in Montessori's method of education. Her major books were translated into many Indian languages. Today, there are many Montessori preschools in India, and some schools in Delhi and Bombay are affiliated with Montessori International. (Pattnaik & Jyotsna,1996).

Previous structure (Education starting from Class 1)

Programs Run by Voluntary Organizations. Many voluntary organizations assisted by the government agencies are actively involved in India in the field of early childhood education. The voluntary agencies work primarily with special groups like tribal people, migrant laborers, and rural children in specific contexts. For example, with the assistance of The Central Social Board, voluntary organizations run creches for children (0-5 age group) of

working and ailing mothers that provide health care, supplementary nutrition and sleeping, play, and recreation facilities. The 1970 Labor Regulation and Abolition Act specified a creche within 50 meters of every workplace where women are employed as contract labor.

Another kind of program run by the voluntary organizations is the mobile creche, which started in 1969 in Delhi to serve the children of migrant laborers in Delhi. At present, mobile creches are available in major cities of Delhi; Bombay, and Pune. They operate at one construction site until the construction is completed and then move to other construction sites along with the workers. The staff is provided on-site training, which is considered more appropriate to the situation. Families are charged a very nominal fee within the reach of the parents at the lowest income levels. Programs Run by Private Institutions, These programs are supported by high tuition fees from students. The preprimary schools in private sectors serve mostly as feeder schools to the primary schools. Therefore, the curriculum is more academically oriented. Moreover, the demand and competition in the formal schools also is a contributing factor in the growing academic orientation in preprimary schools in private sectors. The language of instruction in some schools is Hindi (the national language), in others one of many different state languages or in still others, English. Instruction in English is demanded by the parents because of the demand of the English language in higher education and in the job market. Private programs available in India include: 9 Parochial schools operated by various religious groups. These programs charge tuition fees depending upon the income of parents. Catholic schools in major Indian cities are very competitive and serve mostly middle and upper-middle class groups. Some hold afternoon classes for poor children, both Christian and non-Christian. Children are required to wear uniforms. The teacher-to-child ratio in a class is around 1:35.

International practices in early Childhood Education

Historically, early childhood education in India was managed through Anganwadi centers under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), focusing more on nutrition than formal education. The previous education system started from Class 1, excluding foundational years from government schooling. Comparatively, countries like Finland, Japan, and the UK have institutionalized early education as part of public schooling, emphasizing its critical role in cognitive and emotional development. Early childhood education institutions are referred to preschool, nursery school and practicum schools that educate young children. The curriculum has been developed for children in the early childhood education institutions to provide them with rich learning experience. The aim is to maximize the motor, social-

emotional, linguistic and cognitive development of children and to enable them to gain self-care skills and to be ready for primary school, as well. One of the basic principles of preschool education is the mobilization of imagination and creativity in children. Creativity has not been considered as an individual field in the 2013 preschool curriculum of the Ministry of National Education. However, creativity is the basis of the curriculum. Children must express themselves in different and unique ways in conditions that appropriate to their learning needs and learning styles. To enable this, relevant opportunities should be provided. All the activities to be planned should support creativity. Therefore, understanding creativity is very important for preschool education. Creativity can be referred to as the process of producing original things. It is the development of original opinions and creation of new products and inventions by an individual (Yates & wigg, 2017). The creativity is different in each individual and even the creativity processes within each individual are different. The important thing for the creative activities to take place in the preschool curriculum for children in the preschool period is the availability of appropriate learning techniques and rich materials (Wyse & Dowson, 2009). According to Bloomberg (1973), creativity is the total of the skills in the divergent thinking category. These categories have been defined as fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Fluency is the ability to produce and the number of ideas on the topic. Flexibility is the change of perspectives to the problems. Originality is producing unique ideas. Elaboration is detailing the added ideas. (Setiawan, 2017)

Government's Decision: Policy Overview

Objectives behind introducing LKG and UKG in government schools: The inclusion of LKG and UKG in government schools under NEP 2020 is guided by several strategic objectives. Primarily, the government aims to universalize access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy seeks to bridge the learning gaps that arise due to unequal access to quality pre-primary education, particularly affecting children from marginalized communities.

Universal School Readiness: Ensure that every child entering Grade 1 is equipped with foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Educational Equity: Provide equal access to quality early education across socio-economic groups.

Holistic Development: Promote cognitive, emotional, and physical development through play-based, discovery-oriented pedagogy.

Dropout Reduction: Address high dropout rates by strengthening the foundational years,

thereby improving retention in later grades.

Employment Generation: Create new job opportunities in the education sector through recruitment of early childhood educators and support staff.

By institutionalizing LKG and UKG in government schools, the policy aims to level the playing field between private and public education sectors and address long-standing inequities in school preparedness (Kaul, 2019).

Timeline and Phases of Implementation

The NEP 2020 envisions a phased rollout of foundational stage education across India. The timeline extends through the decade leading up to 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Phase 1 (2021-2023): Pilot implementation in selected states such as Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh. During this phase, curriculum frameworks like NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) were introduced (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Phase 2 (2024-2026): Expansion to all government schools in urban and semi-urban areas, focusing on infrastructure development, teacher training, and community mobilization.

Phase 3 (2027-2030): Universal coverage, reaching rural and remote regions, with strengthened monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Several states, including Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh, have already issued government resolutions (GRs) to initiate the opening of LKG and UKG classes in government schools from the 2023 academic year (Government of Delhi, 2023).

Policy Documents and Government Resolutions

National Education Policy 2020: Provides the overarching vision and structural changes.

NIPUN Bharat Guidelines (2021): Set the standards for foundational literacy and numeracy.

National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE): Under development by NCERT, aimed at st Timeline and phases of implementation

Policy Overview

The NEP 2020 recommends a 5+3+3+4 structure, introducing a Foundational Stage of 5 years (3 years of pre-primary plus Classes 1 and 2). This policy shift aims to ensure that every child receives early education, leading to better literacy, numeracy, and school readiness. The decision aligns with global best practices and is expected to bridge socio-economic gaps by providing free, quality education to underprivileged children from an early

age.

Challenges in Executing the Decision

1. Teacher Recruitment

One major hurdle is the absence of recruitment specifically for foundational stage teachers. Without qualified educators, the policy's success is at risk. The current teacher workforce, primarily trained for primary and upper-primary education, lacks the specialized skills required for early childhood pedagogy.

No recruitment done specifically for foundational stage teachers: A major hurdle in implementing LKG and UKG in government schools is the absence of recruitment efforts specifically targeting foundational stage teachers. Historically, government schools did not require trained preschool educators as formal education began at Class 1. The sudden inclusion of pre-primary levels has left schools scrambling to fill this critical gap.

Current staff in government schools, primarily trained to teach primary grades and above, lack the specialized skills and qualifications necessary for effective early childhood education (ECE). States like Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have temporarily reassigned existing primary teachers to handle LKG and UKG classes without conducting new recruitment drives (Government of Maharashtra, 2023). This approach risks compromising educational quality, as the pedagogy for foundational learners requires unique competencies in play-based learning, emotional development, and cognitive readiness.

Moreover, many Anganwadi workers, though experienced in child care, do not meet the formal teacher qualification criteria set by the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020). The government's delay in initiating large-scale recruitment for ECE-specific posts is thus a significant operational challenge.

Qualification and training gaps: NEP 2020 envisions a cadre of professionally qualified early childhood educators equipped with a minimum 10+2 qualification and specialized training in early childhood pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the ground reality reflects severe qualification and training gaps.

According to UNICEF (2019), only 30% of preschool educators in India possess formal qualifications in ECE.

Government school teachers assigned to LKG and UKG classes often lack exposure to age-appropriate teaching methods, developmental psychology, and interactive learning tools.

Training programs such as the NIPUN Bharat Mission focus primarily on literacy and numeracy, but do not adequately address the broader developmental needs of 3-6-year-olds

(Ministry of Education, 2021).

The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) has proposed new diploma courses for foundational stage educators, but implementation is still in nascent stages (NCTE, 2022). The lack of pre-service and in-service training tailored to early childhood education continues to be a bottleneck in policy execution.

Workload implications for existing teachers: Workload Implications for Existing Teachers
The absence of dedicated recruitment has led to significant workload implications for existing government school teachers. Teachers previously handling Classes 1 to 5 are now expected to manage additional LKG and UKG classes, often without reduction in their existing responsibilities.

This dual burden has led to: Teacher fatigue and job dissatisfaction, particularly in schools with already high pupil-teacher ratios. Compromised teaching quality in both foundational and primary classes. Resistance from teacher unions in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who have raised concerns about unmanageable workloads (The Hindu, 2023). Furthermore, infrastructure gaps mean that teachers also have to take on roles related to classroom setup, resource mobilization, and parent engagement, which adds to their non-teaching workload (Kaul, 2019). Addressing these workload pressures is essential for sustainable implementation. Without sufficient staffing and support mechanisms, the quality of early childhood education is likely to suffer, undermining the policy's foundational goals.

2. Infrastructure Readiness

Government schools are generally not equipped with child-friendly classrooms, play areas, and sanitation facilities necessary for young learners. Retrofitting existing schools or constructing new spaces is capital-intensive and time-consuming.

The successful implementation of LKG and UKG in government schools demands age-appropriate infrastructure, which is currently lacking in many institutions. According to a report by Kaul (2019), most government schools were originally designed for children aged six and above, resulting in an infrastructure mismatch for 3-6-year-olds. Lack of child-friendly, safe, and engaging classrooms hinders the learning experience for younger children. Facilities such as low-height furniture, play areas, and colorful, stimulating classroom environments are rare in public schools, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (UNICEF, 2019). Sanitation and safety are also major concerns. Many schools lack separate, child-sized toilets and safe drinking water facilities suitable for preschoolers. The Ministry of Education (2021) has emphasized the need to upgrade school infrastructure, but

progress has been uneven across states, with significant rural-urban disparities

3. Curriculum Development

The formulation of an official syllabus that aligns with children's developmental stages is crucial. The NIPUN Bharat initiative provides guidelines, but widespread adaptation and teacher training are essential for consistent implementation. The development of an official syllabus for LKG and UKG is a landmark step under NEP 2020. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has taken the lead in framing a curriculum aligned with the principles of play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based learning (NCERT, 2022). This new curriculum is synchronized with the goals of the NIPUN Bharat Mission, which aims to ensure foundational literacy and numeracy for all children by Grade 3 (Ministry of Education, 2021). It includes components such as language development, cognitive skills, socio-emotional growth, and motor skills enhancement. However, the challenge lies in uniformly implementing this syllabus across diverse states and linguistic regions while ensuring that teachers are adequately trained to deliver it effectively. States like Kerala and Karnataka have begun pilot projects, but national-level rollout requires extensive capacity building (NCTE, 2022).

4. Administrative and Financial Constraints

Administrative and Financial Constraints Executing this policy requires substantial investment. Budgetary allocations are limited, and coordination between central and state governments poses administrative hurdles. Implementing foundational education reforms entails significant financial and administrative commitment. Budget allocation remains a major constraint, as states depend on central funds under the Samagra Shiksha scheme, which itself faces periodic funding shortfalls (The Hindu, 2023). Coordination between the central and state governments is another critical factor. While NEP 2020 sets national goals, education is a concurrent subject in India, meaning states have substantial autonomy in implementation. This often leads to delays, policy misalignment, and fragmented execution (Ministry of Education, 2020). Fund management issues also surface due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of accountability mechanisms, impacting the timely construction of classrooms, teacher training, and procurement of teaching-learning materials (Kaul, 2019).

5. Societal Response

Parents in rural and marginalized communities may either welcome or resist this change based on cultural and economic factors. Urban areas may adapt quickly, but rural penetration remains a challenge. Parental awareness and acceptance of formal early childhood

education in government schools show mixed trends. In urban areas, parents welcome the move as it reduces dependency on expensive private preschools. However, in rural and semi-urban regions, awareness about the developmental importance of early education remains low (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, societal readiness is divided along urban-rural lines. Urban schools are better equipped and receive stronger community support, while rural schools face infrastructural and human resource challenges (Government of Maharashtra, 2023). The government and civil society organizations must intensify community mobilization, awareness campaigns, and parental engagement to ensure widespread acceptance and participation in the foundational stage reforms.

Opportunities Created by the Decision

1. Teacher Recruitment and Employment Generation

This decision creates scope for massive teacher recruitment, particularly for early childhood education specialists. New diploma and certification courses can cater to this emerging demand. The introduction of LKG and UKG classes in government schools creates significant employment opportunities. With the need for specialized foundational stage educators, the policy opens avenues for recruiting trained Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) professionals. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) has proposed new diploma and degree programs to prepare educators for this stage (NCTE, 2022). If implemented at scale, this decision could create thousands of teaching jobs, particularly benefiting female employment, as the ECCE sector is predominantly staffed by women (Kaul, 2019).

2. Access to Quality Education for Poor Kids

Poor and marginalized children will benefit from structured early education, leading to better school performance and lower dropout rates. **Access to Quality Education for Poor Kids**

One of the most transformative aspects of the NEP 2020 decision is the promise of providing poor children with free, quality early education. Previously, access to early childhood education was primarily limited to private preschools, which were unaffordable for low-income families (UNICEF, 2019). By integrating LKG and UKG into government schools, the policy democratizes early education, giving children from disadvantaged backgrounds the developmental head start necessary for lifelong learning. This inclusion has long-term implications for reducing drop-out rates, improving learning outcomes, and breaking cycles of poverty (Ministry of Education, 2021).

3. Curriculum Standardization

An official government curriculum ensures uniformity and quality control, reducing disparities between urban and rural education standards. The standardization of the LKG and UKG curriculum across the nation ensures that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, receive structured and high-quality foundational education. NCERT's development of age-appropriate, play-based curricula ensures uniformity while allowing for linguistic and cultural adaptations at the state level (NCERT, 2022). Such standardization helps in setting clear learning benchmarks, as laid out in the NIPUN Bharat mission, and facilitates better monitoring, assessment, and reporting of early learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2021). In the long term, this will bridge learning gaps and contribute to greater equity in India's diverse education system

4. Child Development Benefits

Scientific research confirms that early childhood education significantly boosts cognitive, emotional, and social skills, better preparing children for lifelong learning. Additionally, support staff, including helpers and caregivers, will also be required, thus expanding employment in rural and semi-urban areas. Teacher training institutions will experience increased demand, providing a boost to the education sector economy

Management of Policy Implementation

The Ministry of Education and State Departments play pivotal roles in managing this transition. Strategies include phased recruitment, infrastructure upgrades, curriculum workshops, and community sensitization programs to ensure smooth policy execution. **The** National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the universalization of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and aims to bring all children aged 3-6 years under formal, structured learning systems. Unified Framework: NEP mandates the creation of a National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE) by NCERT to standardize early learning across India. Integration of Anganwadis and Pre-Primary Schools: A blended system to combine health, nutrition, and early education, addressing fragmentation. Quality Monitoring Performance Grading Index (PGI) tools and state dashboards to assess ECCE implementation. Dual control by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (Anganwadis) and Ministry of Education (schools) causing overlap. Lack of a single nodal monitoring authority for ECCE quality.

Conclusion

The NEP's shift to formal early childhood education offers transformative benefits but faces significant execution challenges. Teacher recruitment, infrastructure development, and societal sensitization are critical success factors. In the long term, the policy promises to democratize education, improve learning outcomes, and foster equitable growth. Recommendations include increasing budget allocations, launching massive teacher training drives, and phased policy rollouts with community engagement. The NEP 2020 framework for ECCE presents significant opportunities for improving India's foundational education, but success hinges on overcoming challenges in inter-ministerial coordination, recruitment, infrastructure, and community engagement. States that have implemented pilot models provide a pathway for scalable, effective rollouts.

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