



NEP 2020 AND ANGANWADI CENTRES: FOCUSING ON FOUNDATION OF LEARNING

Deepali Bhagat, Ph.D

E-mail id: deepalif165@gmail.com

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‘Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India issued a draft on National Educational Policy 2020 with the objective at producing engaged, productive and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our constitution.: NEP 2020.’

The New Education Policy 2020 has also included a strong base of early childhood care and education (ECCE) from the age of 3 years which was not covered by the previous policy in the 10+2 structure as class 1 began at the age of 6.

In order to take lead in the implementation of the NEP 2020 state governments are focusing on training more than a million Anganwadi workers to render early childhood care and education (ECCE) to pre-school students. Despite of 86th amendment Act 2002 inserted Article 21-A to make free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of six to 14 years as a fundamental right due to which the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) came into force in April 2010, however the country's effort to impart universal elementary education is nowhere near to its goal. (Reshi,2021)

About National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The NEP 2020 said: Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children must become an immediate national mission. What is worrisome is that far too many six-year-olds are entering Class 1 with very limited Early Childhood Care and Education due to lack of any suitable preprimary options.

"Schooling in the early years also lays too little curricular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy and, in general, on the reading, writing, and speaking of languages and on mathematical ideas and thinking," the NEP 2020 said.

The NEP 2020 recommended a redesign of educational institutions vis-à-vis curriculum and schedules for friendly atmosphere for learning mathematics among the students, despite of bad condition of the state of affairs, which help to prepare a roadmap ahead to have maximum concentration on foundational literacy and numeracy. Moreover, NEP 2020 in its another recommendation added a temporary 10-year project to draw women from local communities as instructors to help the local students to bring them back into the field through its Remedial Instructional Aides Programme (RIAP).

The policy also called for a large-scale community and volunteer involvement for the process to be a success. The institution of National Tutors Programme (NTP) has been incorporated in the policy where the best performers in each school will be drawn for up to five hours a week as tutors during the school for fellow (generally younger) students who need help. "Being selected as a peer tutor will be considered a prestigious position, earning a certificate from the State each year that indicates the hours of service," the NEP 2020 said to encourage such participation.

"Qualified volunteers (such as retired teachers and army officers, excellent students from neighboring schools, and passionate socially-conscious college graduates from across the country) will also be drawn on a large scale to join the NTP and the RIAP on an unpaid basis, during the academic year as well as in the summer, as a service to their communities and to the country," the NEP 2020 said. (According to NEP,2022)

Revamping Anganwadi system

If we consider the Kasturirangan committee it rightly realized the importance of educating an individual well young in age.

It is here the Anganwadi, which means "courtyard shelter", a system that was started by the Central government way back in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme to combat child hunger and malnutrition, becomes critical.

There are 13.42 lakh Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) functioning across the country today. The AWCs are the focal point for the implementation of all health, nutrition and early learning initiatives under ICDS. The observation of the committee on the present condition of AWCs is not very enthusiastic. (According to the Ministry of Education, GOI.,2019)

"Anganwadis are currently quite deficient in supplies and infrastructure for education; as a result, they tend to contain more children in the 2-4-year age range and fewer in the educationally critical 4-6-year age range; they also have few teachers trained in or specially dedicated to early childhood education. Meanwhile, private and other pre-schools have largely functioned as downward extensions of primary school," the committee said in the National Education Policy 2020.

Focusing on the infrastructure and the human resource gives us an insight that that they are not strong enough upon which the foundation of the whole educational structure can be laid.

"The learning process for a child commences immediately at birth. Evidence from neuroscience shows that over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6, indicating the critical importance of developmentally appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in a child's early years to promote sustained and healthy brain development and growth," the committee said in NEP 2020.

Without proper care in the early years, deficiencies in the development of critical areas of the brain and corresponding adverse effects on cognitive and emotional processing ultimately stand as an obstacle in shaping up a quality human asset.

"Excellent care, nurture, nutrition, physical activity, psycho-social environment, and cognitive and emotional stimulation during a child's first six years are thus considered extremely critical for ensuring proper brain development and, consequently, desired learning curves over a person's lifetime," the NEP 2020 said.

While many AWCs have fared well with respect to healthcare for mothers and infants, helped support parents and build communities, providing critical nutrition and health awareness, immunization, basic health check-ups, and referrals and connections to local public health systems, their success is not impressive when it comes to the educational aspects of ECCE.

In no indefinite terms, the NEP 2020 made it distinct that the consolidation of the Anganwadi system is immutable.

"Anganwadi Centres will be heavily built up to deal with the educational needs of children up to the age of 6. In particular, Anganwadi workers trained in techniques of cognitive stimulation for infants and of play-based and multilevel education for 3-6 year old will be stationed across the country," the policy said.

The policy stressed the colocation of AWCs and primary schools as a prerequisite during location preparation for new AWCs and primary schools or to ensure high-quality stand-alone pre-schools in areas where existing AWCs and primary schools are not able to take on the educational requirements.

Talking about the administrative side, the policy said that the responsibility for planning and implementation of all ECCE curriculum and pedagogy in AWCs and all pre-schools will lie with the human resource development ministry.

The NEP 2020 highly emphasizes on the right approach to early childhood care and education.

Going forward from the age of 3 to 6, the policy emphasized on developing "self-help skills (such as "getting ready on one's own"), motor skills, cleanliness, the handling of separation anxiety, being comfortable around one's peers, moral development (such as knowing the difference between "right" and "wrong"), physical development through movement and exercise."

Communication with parents and others to express thoughts and feelings, gaining patience to finish a task and acquiring good habits are also key focus during this period of an ideal ECCE. During all this, continuous healthcare and nutrition should go on unhindered.

"... it is important that children of ages 3-8 have access to a flexible, multifaceted, multilevel, play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based education. It also becomes natural then to view this period, from up to three years of pre-school (ages 3-6) to the end of Grade 2 (age 8), as a single pedagogical unit called the "Foundational Stage"," the NEP 2020 said.

The committee also recommended that to ensure ECCE to all children before the age of six, ECCE should be included as an integral part of the RTE Act.

("NEP 2020: Quality of Anganwadi Centres to determine success of policy paving way for inclusive education",2020)

Challenges on the way to implementation of NEP 2020 in the Anganwadi Centres

1. NEP 2020 has a rounded approach as likely for a welfare society apart from for some absurdities. However, many suggestions seem more ambitious than realistic. For example, high-quality infrastructure and amenities are required for the implementation of the policy. These demands have become more relevant with the standard change in the sector due to the pandemic. However, the present state of the school infrastructure is still mostly deplorable. Additionally, the existing teachers are to be trained to teach the new curriculum, which is another massive challenge for the government. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is also required to sustain quality as many teachers in the current system are accidental teachers. The cost of CPD is a recurring expense.
2. The pre-primary and primary years are formative and seminal, where we require the best of the facilitators with intensive training. This is what we see in developed countries. The NEP states that “Anganwadi workers/teachers with qualifications of 10+2 and above shall be given a 6-month certificate program in ECCE; and those with lower educational qualifications shall be given a one-year diploma program covering early literacy, numeracy, and other relevant aspects of ECCE.” What can they learn in six months or in one year? The government should plan degree equivalent in-service courses to equip the facilitators very well for taking the pre-primary and primary education to a world-class level.
3. The policy stipulates that public investment in education should be up to 6% of the GDP. The current investment is only 3.1%. This will bring substantial additional financial liability for the central and state governments; they have to find 6.4 lakh cores additionally. Therefore, funding for the implementation of the Policy is the most significant challenge. One of the suggestions in the policy to overcome the financial crunch is a public-philanthropist partnership for bettering the school education facilities. It is an excellent thought, but how many resources can we gather from such collaborations? Consequently, high levels of private investment are essential for the process of elevating India to a knowledge economy. This situation will lead to greater commercialization of education despite all the precautionary measures mentioned in the policy.

4. Political opposition will be another major challenge. The opposition parties criticize that it is a ploy of the neoliberal capitalists to plunder the resources of India. The government, however, will be able to overcome this criticism as it does not hold much legitimacy. India started courting neoliberal capitalism in 1991. Consequently, the Indian economy is already merged with the international political economy; integrated irreversibly with the global economy in all areas, including finance, trade and foreign policies. The middle class believes that it is better to be a part of neoliberal capitalism to protect their interests and that the curriculum of the 21st century should prepare the next generation for employment in the world market. They, therefore, support the policy wholeheartedly.

However, how will we overcome the funding challenge? (“Challenges in NEP 2020 Implementation” 2021)

As I am from Jammu, the Govt. Jammu and Kashmir, like other states and UTs, has started implementation of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 amid huge challenges and financial constraints. To begin with, the UT government has formed two task force groups to ensure proper implementation of the first phase of NEP which was expected to be implemented by April 2022. Experts say that implementing NEP in a guided time frame will not be an easy task in Jammu and Kashmir. They say the shortage of teachers, lack of infrastructure, and lack of teachers’ skill development training could be the biggest obstacles in implementing NEP in a set time frame. For example, they say the translation of books into regional languages (mother tongues) is a huge and time-consuming process and cannot be completed in a short period of time. Moreover, it will be a big challenge for the Jammu and Kashmir government to create an environment for the training of professionals, filling new posts and training the existing staff, and building the required infrastructure.

Conclusion

Since different state governments have begun charting out plans for the implementation of the NEP 2020 in their respective jurisdictions, they should make sure that the Anganwadis get their due. In recent times, Anganwadi Workers across the country were found on the streets fighting for their rights and demanding that they be considered as permanent workers. Foundational learning is an important component for the holistic development of children and it’s time that we recognise the needs of those who provide these foundational services. For successful implementation of the heart and soul of the NEP and for building a high quality cadre of ECCE teachers, it is important that state governments first define the roles and responsibilities of the Anganwadis with a better

and improved vision as clearly as possible and carry a thorough research on the phased execution as to how to overcome all the challenges and implement the policy in true spirit.

As Educators, we all are looking forward with open and optimistic mindset to accept these much-desired changes in our education system. We are really hopeful that the implementation of this highly-anticipated policy will establish a new world of learning for our coming generations. NEP 2020 will surely play a significant role in producing quality human resources who will be equipped not only with knowledge of the content and desired intellect, but also with essential skills, values and attitude, to face the challenges in the path of future success to navigate our nation in the desired direction of growth and development.

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