

# Quality Early Childhood Education Under NEP 2020: Bridging Gaps and Building Futures

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## Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced by the Government of India has redefined the educational landscape, with early childhood education (ECE) emerging as one of its core priorities. Recognizing the critical role of early years in a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development, from infancy until age eight, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is essential for promoting children's overall development. NEP 2020 introduces a structured and inclusive framework for providing quality early childhood education to children across India. This policy aims to bridge gaps in accessibility, inclusivity, and quality, ensuring that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, receive a strong educational foundation. NEP 2020 emphasizes play-based learning, teacher training, and integration of Anganwadi centers with schools to make ECE accessible to underserved communities. This article discusses the various aspects of NEP 2020's approach to early childhood education, highlighting the steps taken to provide quality education, bridge gaps, and build futures. This document is a template to provide guidance about formatting the research papers which are going to be submitted to the journal IJFMR. Authors can get a general idea of formatting and various possible sections in the research paper.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education (ECE), National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Play-Based Learning, 5+3+3+4 Education Structure, Anganwadi Integration, Multilingual Education, Qualified ECCE Educators, Inclusive Education.

## 1. Introduction: The Importance of Early Childhood Education in NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a milestone in Indian education reform, placing unprecedented emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). In recognizing the crucial developmental phase from ages 3-6, the policy aligns with research that identifies early childhood as a critical period for cognitive and social-emotional growth. Quality early childhood education promotes lifelong skills, reduces dropout rates, and bridges learning disparities. In India, gaps in early childhood education, especially for children in rural and underserved communities, have posed significant challenges. ECE has always been mostly ignored in India. This began with the 1965–1966 Kothari Commission Report and continues with the 2009 Right to Education Act, which denied children aged three to six the fundamental right to an education.

The NEP 2020, on the other hand, calls for a five-year foundational stage of education, which includes the first two years of primary school and three years of early childhood education. To put it another way, ECE is now expected to cover the ages of three to eight. It is crucial to remember that the improvements outlined in NEP 2020 are inevitably curriculum-based rather than pertaining to the actual infrastructure

of ECE. It is anticipated that the current ECE infrastructure—anganwadis, autonomous pre-school centers, and pre-primary sections of schools—will be reinforced, but only if the government develops a clear plan.

Additionally, it recommends that the ECE program and the curricula for Grades 1 and 2 be consistent. Though much will rely on how we actually put these suggested improvements into practice, they have the potential to revolutionize early learning in India.

In order to create a solid foundation for all students, NEP 2020 seeks to close these gaps. With the goal of fostering holistic development and school readiness, the NEP highlights the necessity of a flexible and play-based approach to learning throughout the foundational years. The objective is to guarantee that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECCE), encouraging a love of learning from a young age.

## 2. Special Reference to ECCE in NEP-2020

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is highlighted in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a vital cornerstone of lifelong learning. NEP 2020 has several important allusions to ECCE, such as:

1. **Universal Access:** By 2025, NEP wants all children ages 3-6 to have access to high-quality early childhood education and care.
2. **Curricular Framework:** The policy acknowledges the significance of age-appropriate pedagogies and promotes an adaptable, play-based curriculum framework for ECCE.
3. **Teacher Training:** NEP promotes ongoing professional development by highlighting the necessity of qualified and driven educators for ECCE.
4. **Integration with School Education:** To guarantee a seamless transition from early childhood to primary education, the policy recommends integrating ECCE with the official school system.
5. **Parent and Community Engagement:** In recognition of their importance to children's overall development, NEP promotes parents' and communities' active participation in ECCE.
6. **Evaluation Practices:** To reduce stress and encourage joyful learning, the policy recommends non-intrusive, play-based evaluation techniques to determine a child's development in ECCE.

## 3. Key Components of Quality Early Childhood Education under NEP 2020

### a. The 5+3+3+4 Educational Structure

NEP 2020 introduces the 5+3+3+4 educational structure, a shift from the traditional 10+2 model. This structure allocates the first five years to foundational learning, comprising three years of pre-primary education and two years of early primary schooling. By focusing on the developmental needs of young children, this structure lays a solid groundwork for cognitive and social growth, acknowledging that early childhood is foundational to future learning.

### b. Emphasis on Play-Based and Activity-Based Learning

NEP 2020 stresses the importance of play-based and experiential learning, which fosters creativity, curiosity, and problem-solving skills. The curriculum in early childhood education under NEP prioritises play-based activities, storytelling, music, and hands-on experiences, creating a child-centric environment. Children learn best through engaging, interactive activities that allow them to explore and experiment, making play-based learning critical for nurturing their development.

### c. Multilingual Education and Mother Tongue Emphasis

Acknowledging India's linguistic diversity, NEP 2020 recommends using the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction in early years. Research shows that learning in one's native language can enhance understanding and retention, which is crucial for cognitive development. By promoting multilingualism, NEP 2020 creates a learning environment that is culturally inclusive and effective, setting the stage for enhanced comprehension and critical thinking.

### d. Teacher Training and Professional Development

The success of ECCE under NEP 2020 largely depends on qualified and well-trained educators. The policy outlines plans to develop specialized ECCE teachers through training and certification programs. By investing in professional development, NEP 2020 aims to create a skilled cadre of early childhood educators equipped to implement play-based learning and foster children's social-emotional development.

### e. Integration of Anganwadis and Schools

One of the significant strategies under NEP 2020 is the integration of Anganwadi centers with primary schools. Anganwadis, which have traditionally focused on health and nutrition, will now play a role in early education, supported by trained educators. This integration helps ensure that children in underserved areas, especially those from low-income families, have access to early childhood education. This approach promotes equity and accessibility by reaching children who might otherwise lack early educational opportunities.

### f. Parental and Community Engagement

NEP 2020 recognizes that parents and communities are integral to a child's early learning journey. It encourages parental involvement and community partnerships to create a supportive environment. Schools are encouraged to provide resources for parents, empowering them to support learning at home and reinforcing educational concepts introduced in school. This holistic approach enhances the child's overall development and fosters a learning ecosystem that includes the family as an active participant.

## 4. Several systemic challenges impact ECE outcomes in India:

- **Policy level challenges:** Inter-ministerial coordination is a necessity and a challenge for achieving ECE outcomes. ECE still does not come under the ambit of the Right to Education the budget allocation is a meager 2.9% of the GDP, whereas the recommended budget allocation by NEP is 6% of the GDP.
- **Funding:** Anganwadi centers have been receiving less funding than their requirement. ECE is not a priority funding area for the CSR too, with only 3-4% of the top 77 funders in education investing in ECE.
- **Governance:** Enrollment as the only parameter for measuring quality of ECE makes it challenging to make informed decisions. A quality assurance mechanism that covers both public and private provisions of ECE needs to be developed and implemented. No role of the community, panchayats and parents in the monitoring of ECE also acts as a bottleneck in improving governance.
- **Assessments:** Capability challenges of Anganwadi workers (AWW) hinder the portfolio creation of students after assessing them on the basis of observation, checklists and interviews. A standardized assessment framework to measure school-readiness does not exist.
- **Classroom processes:** Overburdening of AWW with low salary and lack of in-service capacity building opportunities lead to deprioritizing of ECE in Anganwadi centers. Poor infrastructure and

non-availability of academic resources also hamper the teaching-learning process.

- **Outside Classroom factors:** Parents demand the formal practicing of 3Rs in preschool, with a thrust on rote learning, due to their lack of awareness of developmentally appropriate curriculum. Parents' perception of Anganwadis as nutrition centers, and their inability to participate in the child's learning leads to low school-readiness amongst students entering Grade 1.

## 5. ECCE Opportunities in NEP-2020

1. The Anganwadis will be strengthened with top-notch facilities, play equipment, and highly qualified Anganwadis supervisors, teachers, and coworkers in order to provide universal access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).
2. In rural and tribally dominated areas, Ashram Shalas can also be used to gradually introduce early childhood care and education.
3. Every Anganwadis should have a well-built, well-ventilated structure with improved educational facilities.
4. To guarantee that there is simple access to funding for the production of effective early childhood care and education (ECCE) teachers, teacher training should be included as a skill gap in the list of national skill development corporations.
5. The finest investment India can make for our children and the future of our country is probably universal access to high-quality early childhood care and education.
6. The whole shape of the ECCE concept of care is not obvious in NEP 2020 and needs to be further developed and given greater consideration because early childhood care is essential to a child's overall development. Use equation editor feature of your word processing software to create equation if equation contains division, or multiple lines.

## 6. Bridging Gaps in Early Childhood Education

India faces significant disparities in access to early childhood education, especially in rural and marginalized communities. NEP 2020 addresses these gaps by:

- **Expanding Access:** Through the integration of Anganwadis and primary schools, NEP 2020 ensures that children in rural and low-income areas have access to early education.
- **Promoting Inclusivity:** The emphasis on multilingual education and culturally relevant teaching ensures that all children, regardless of linguistic or cultural background, feel included and can learn effectively.
- **Ensuring Affordability:** By prioritizing public early childhood education, NEP 2020 reduces the need for costly private options, making quality ECCE accessible for all.

## 7. Building Futures: The Long-Term Impact of NEP 2020 on ECCE

- The NEP 2020 vision for ECCE has far-reaching implications for the future of education in India. The policy lays a foundation that not only addresses educational needs but also fosters critical life skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and social responsibility. By providing quality early education, NEP 2020 contributes to building a generation of lifelong learners who can navigate challenges and contribute to society.
- The successful implementation of these reforms requires commitment from government agencies, educators, community leaders, and families. NEP 2020's framework, if effectively applied, will

ensure a more inclusive, equitable, and quality education system, and empowering children across India to succeed in a rapidly evolving world.

### **Conclusions**

NEP 2020's approach to early childhood education represents a pivotal shift in India's educational landscape, aiming to bridge longstanding gaps and lay the foundation for a more equitable and effective educational system. Through its emphasis on equitable, quality, inclusivity, and accessibility, NEP 2020 envisions a future where every child receives the support needed to thrive in school and beyond. Quality early childhood education, as outlined in NEP 2020, is an investment in the nation's future, creating pathways to success and fostering lifelong learning.

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