



NEP 2020 AND THE FUTURE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Education is a dynamic process through which necessary changes in society are attained. The overall development of any country and nation is possible through education. The future of any country mostly depends on the various research conducted in the field of education of that country and the proper application of its valuable results in the right field. Children are the foundation of any nation. In India, NEP 2020 is the 1st educational policy of the 21st century. The New Education Policy of India emphasizes producing human beings with traits and virtues like courage, rational thinking, action, knowledge, compassion, empathy, creative attitude and proper vision towards life. Early childhood education is a key pillar of the whole education system. Therefore, NEP 2020 significantly focuses on the field of ECCE. NEP 2020 recognizes that every child needs to be included in ECCE to facilitate India's future success and prosperity. This literature review synthesizes key studies examining the delivery of ECCE through India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the reforms proposed under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. While ICDS has played a pivotal role in combining nutrition, health, and preschool education for over four decades, NEP 2020 shifts the focus toward foundational literacy, cognitive development, and curricular integration. Previous research reveals both convergence and conflict between these frameworks, especially in areas such as governance, workforce capacity, and curriculum implementation. This paper explores the different aspects of ECCE in the light of NEP 2020 and suggests ways to improve the quality of ECCE in the future. The review tries to attract the attention of the Indian Government to adopt a unified approach for aligning ICDS to NEP and organise the ECCE programme in such a way that combines the strengths of health, nutrition, and education for holistic child development in India.

Keywords: Anganwadi, Early learning, Education, National Education Policy 2020, Sustainable Development Goal

Introduction:

The first six years of life are very important because at this age, children develop at a much faster rate than at any other stage of life. 85% of children's brain advancement takes place by the age of 6. Therefore, a child's overall development pace is negatively affected if there is no setting available which is conducive to their development. ECCE is a program designed to create an environment conducive to the early stages of lifelong learning. Education is a



powerful tool on which the present and future economic, social, political, and all other forms of development of the country depend. NEP 2020 places a strong emphasis on raising and maintaining the standard of India's educational system at all levels for the country's overall development, one of which is ECCE. According to NEP 2020, "Universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready" (National Education Policy, 2020).

Objectives of the study:

- To examine how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions and prioritises early childhood care and education;
- To discuss the recommendations of NEP 2020 in the field of ECCE;
- To discuss the significance of NEP in the context of ECCE;
- **To analyze the main role of the Integrated Child Development Services scheme in ECCE and its overlap with the provisions of NEP 2020;**
- To discuss the challenges in implementing the recommendations of NEP in the context of ECCE;
- To suggest some ways for the improvement of the quality of ECCE.

Review of related studies:

Rumi & Mete (2024) explored the opportunities and challenges presented by NEP 2020, highlighting its potential to increase accessibility, improve quality, and enhance skill development, while also addressing implementation hurdles and resource constraints.

Saikia (2024) highlights the value of ECCE in promoting the overall growth and development of children from birth to age eight. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the significance of ECCE, recognizing its remarkable effect on children's future growth and development. This paper examines how ECCE is represented in the NEP 2020, highlighting its vital importance in supporting children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

Sardar & Miah (2024) explored in their paper the opportunities and challenges presented by NEP 2020, which replaces the 1986 NEP. The policy introduces a new curriculum structure, integrates ECCE, and aims to improve basic, secondary, and higher secondary education. The study is mainly based on existing literature and provides insights into the evolution of education in India and the implications of NEP 2020 for school education.

Biswas (2023) discusses in his paper that the NEP 2020 is a national policy designed to reform India's education system, intending to ensure access to quality education for all, promote holistic development, and increase flexibility and innovation. Although the policy offers numerous opportunities, its implementation is hindered by challenges like insufficient infrastructure, concerns related to equity, access, lack of qualified teachers, and inclusion.

Kumar (2023) outlined the importance of ECCE in the context of the NEP 2020. The policy recognizes ECCE as a crucial foundation for learning and has extended the Right to Education eligibility window to 3-18 years. However, implementing ECCE poses challenges, including establishing centres, providing teacher facilities, and designing conducive curricula. The chapter highlights the key provisions of NEP 2020 for ECCE, including flexible and play-based



learning, and emphasizes the critical role of teachers in implementing ECCE and promoting child development.

Kaul et al. (2017) and **NIPCCD (2019)** have evaluated the performance of ICDS. While the scheme has significantly expanded outreach, especially in disadvantaged and rural areas, concerns remain around the quality of preschool education, training of Anganwadi workers, and infrastructure. Kaul and Sankar (2009) emphasized the variability in the quality of ECCE services, noting that Anganwadi workers often lacked pedagogical training, resulting in inconsistent learning experiences for children. **UNICEF (2022)** and **Save the Children (2020)** identify systemic challenges in integrating ICDS with NEP mandates. These include the dual governance structure, lack of clarity in roles, and the need for enhanced capacity among front-line workers. Anganwadi workers, the backbone of ICDS, often lack the qualifications to deliver the new National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE). As a result, implementation of NEP's ECCE goals may bypass or marginalize existing structures unless convergence is planned.

Global experiences from countries like Brazil and South Africa highlight the importance of inter-sectoral coordination in delivering ECCE (UNESCO, 2015). These cases illustrate that high-quality ECCE requires not only curriculum reform but also investments in training, community engagement, and governance reforms—lessons that are highly relevant to India's context.

Methodology:

This research utilizes an analytical method to examine the issue. The primary data was collected from the original draft of NEP 2020, and the secondary data was collected from different internet sources, journals, articles, websites, books, etc.

The ECCE and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:

In September 2015, the United Nations took a significant step forward in promoting global sustainability by convening the Sustainable Development Summit in New York. During this summit, leaders from around the world agreed upon the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets designed to tackle various global issues. India embraced this agenda the same year, recognizing its important role in contributing to worldwide progress. Among these goals, Sustainable Development Goal 4 focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. A key target within this goal aims to provide every child with access to quality early childhood care, education, and development by the year 2030 (Kumar, 2024). Specifically, SDG 4.2 stresses the importance of access to quality early childhood development, pre-primary education and care. According to UNESCO (2016), investing in ECCE promotes equity and reduces later remediation costs. The NEP's emphasis on foundational learning aligns with global trends, such as the OECD's Starting Strong reports, which highlight the importance of ECCE in promoting educational equity and economic growth.

The vision of the 2030 Agenda for SDGs in the field of ECCE consists of:



Equitable access: Guarantee that all children gain access to the best quality ECCE, irrespective of background, location and circumstances.

Holistic development: To support and ameliorate children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Inclusive and effective: Provide ECCE that is inclusive and effective for all children, including those with impairments.

Qualified teachers: Ensure that ECCE teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to deliver high-standard instruction and care.

Family and community involvement: To ameliorate children's growth and well-being, promote family and community involvement in ECCE.

Collaboration and partnerships: To guarantee well-coordinated and successful ECCE policies and initiatives, encourage collaboration and partnerships between the public and commercial sectors.

Monitoring and assessment: Provisioning reliable monitoring and evaluation methods to measure advancement and raise the standard and accessibility of ECCE.

By accomplishing these, the United Nations attempted to establish a solid cornerstone for lifelong learning, socialisation, development and preparation for the future lives of children. Hence, the NEP 2020 is aligned with the target of the 2030 agenda for SDGs and intends to make education more comprehensive, adaptable and multidisciplinary to remake India into a dynamic knowledge-based nation and intellectual superpower in the world (Vadeyar, 2022).

NEP 2020 and ECCE:

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a crucial time for brain development of a child, and it sets the basis for future learning. During this period, early experiences shape brain development and create neural connections that support language, thought, problem-solving ability, social skills, behaviour, and emotional health of a child (Middya, 2023).

The NEP 2020 appears to favour inclusive, holistic education that is centred on inquiry, discovery, curiosity, discussion and analysis. NEP 2020 also stressed equality, quality, affordability and accountability in education. ECCE is not included in the previous 10 + 2 framework of School Education. However, the New Education Policy has strongly emphasised ECCE and introduced the 5 + 3 + 3 + 4 school education framework, including ECCE.

NEP 2020 envisions universal access to ECCE by 2030. Key provisions include:

- Integrating ECCE into the school curriculum (3–8 years as a foundational stage).
- Creation of National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE).
- Professional development for ECCE educators.

These align with international practices seen in countries like Finland and Singapore, where ECCE is an integral part of formal education systems (OECD, 2020).



Objectives of ECCE in NEP 2020:

- To develop healthy habits, a good physique, and adequate muscular coordination in maintaining good physical health
- To teach the child a sense of empathy and to help them acquire a positive social attitude and manners that would promote positive interactions with others
- To improve the child's capacity for clear, accurate and unambiguous speaking in which he expresses his or her ideas and feelings
- To improve the socio-emotional and cognitive abilities of children
- To help a child acquire all multifaceted personality traits
- To help children acquire the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy
- To use play activities to encourage a curriculum that empathises joy and happiness (Aggarwal & Gupta, 2022).

School Education Structure and NEP 2020:

The NEP 2020 of India presented the 5 + 3 + 3 + 4 education framework for School education. which includes:

Period of classes	Classes	Age	Name of the stage
5 years	Preschool/Anganwadi	3 -6	Foundational stage
	Class 1 to 2	6-8	
3 years	Class 3 to 5	8-11	Preparatory stage
3 years	Class 6 to 8	11- 14	Middle stage
3 years	Class 9 to 12	14-18	Secondary stage

Curriculum for the Foundational Level:

According to NEP 2020, NCERT will develop the National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) in two separate phases. one for 3–8 years aged children and another for 0–3 years aged children. Based on the most recent ECCE research, NEP 2020 emphasises the inclusion of storytelling, poetry, games, art, dance and nature study in the ECCE curriculum (Phulari et al., 2022).



Execution delivery of ECCE:

To guarantee that ECCE is accessible to every child, NEP 2020 suggests ECCE can be delivered through-

- stand-alone Anganwadis (not associated with any pre-primary or primary schools)
- Anganwadis, which are co-located with the pre-primary or primary schools
- Pre-primary section connected with primary schools (at least cover 5 to 6 years aged children)
- Stand-alone preschools (not connected with any Anganwadis and primary schools)

NEP 2020 also recommended hiring teachers and staff with specialised training and who are familiar with the ECCE curriculum and methodology.

Significance of NEP 2020 in the context of ECCE:

NEP marks a paradigm shift by:

- Recognising the critical nature of the early years.
- Shifting from rote-based to play-based, inquiry-led pedagogy.
- Establishing institutional accountability in ECCE delivery.

Studies such as Kaul & Bhattacharjea (2021) highlight the long-term cognitive and socio-emotional benefits of early learning, validating NEP's approach.

However, NEP 2020 has various significances in the field of ECCE. These are:

- **Holistic development:** NEP 2020 focuses on a multi-faceted and holistic education approach to fulfil the all-round development of children through the ECCE programme.
- **Foundational learning:** The Early years are a very crucial period for subsequent learning. Hence, NEP 2020 stresses foundational learning for 3-8-year-old children.
- **Inclusivity:** NEP 2020 emphasises the inclusion of all children in ECCE irrespective of their gender, class, geographical location, etc.
- **Universal access:** NEP 2020 intends to guarantee that every child in the three to six-year age range has access to high-standard early childhood education and care.
- **Curricular framework:** NEP 2020 suggests following and maintaining a flexible, adaptable, play-based and age-appropriate curriculum in ECCE.
- **Teacher training:** NEP 2020 puts the stress on the significance of well-trained and professional teachers in creating a suitable environment for the overall development of ECC children.
- **Parent and community engagement:** NEP 2020 placed a strong emphasis on creating a collaborative environment between parents and the local community with ECCE educators for their child's benefit.
- **Effective transition to primary education:** NEP 2020 emphasizes on overall development of children through ECCE so that their effective transition is possible from ECCE to primary education.



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- **Assessment practices:** NEP 2020 suggests a play-based assessment to measure the progress of ECCE children (Sahoo & Pradhan, 2024).

The main role of ICDS in ECCE and its overlap with NEP 2020:

The Integrated Child Development Services is the largest program in India delivering ECCE, nutrition, and health services through Anganwadi centres since 1975. NEP 2020 acknowledges the importance of early years but places primary responsibility for ECCE under the Education Ministry, potentially shifting the focus away from the ICDS framework.

- **Overlap and conflict:** ICDS prioritizes nutrition and health along with pre-schooling, while NEP emphasizes cognitive and academic development. This creates a gap in coordination between the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and the Ministry of Education.
- **Institutional conflict risk:** The New National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE) requires integration with ICDS workers (Anganwadi Workers), who often lack formal teaching qualifications (UNICEF, 2022).

The challenges and implementation barriers of NEP 2020's recommendations in the context of ECCE:

The following difficulties could prevent the effective implementation of the recommendations of NEP 2020 in the area of ECCE:

- **Inclusivity:** It includes barriers to universal care and education in remote places and meeting the requirements of current facilities. The policy supported universal access and inclusion in education. However, there are several inequalities in India's educational system, including gender, caste, area, socioeconomic status, etc.
- **Infrastructural limitations:** It covers problems related to psychological and structural limitations. These include- lack of sufficient spaces and equipment, limited access to clean water, hygiene facilities, sanitation, inadequate lighting and ventilation, etc.
- **Training:** In addition, it covers issues with Anganwadi supervisors, workers and ECCE teachers' training. This caused to decrease in the effectiveness of ECCE, low outcomes of the child, etc.
- **Funding:** A considerable amount of funds is needed to achieve NEP 2020, yet the policy is ambiguous on how that money is to be raised.
- **Lack of awareness:** The improper acknowledgement and awareness about ECCE and NEP 2020 may lead to low enrolment rates, poor quality services, decreased community engagement, improper policy implementation, etc.
- **Assessment practices:** NEP 2020 suggests a play-based assessment for measuring the progress of children, but this assessment process may be challenging, especially where play materials and resources are limited.
- **Improper Coordination:** It includes problems due to the lack of proper coordination between the central, state governments and the private sector.

Despite these, the NEP faces several implementation challenges affirmed by various organisations:



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- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Many Anganwadi centres lack basic amenities (NITI Aayog, 2021).
 - **Educator Capacity:** ECCE workers often lack formal training (UNICEF India, 2022).
 - **Monitoring and Quality Assurance:** There is an absence of uniform standards (NCERT, 2020).
 - **Integration Challenges:** Bridging existing preschool systems (private/public) with NEP's structure is complex.

Recommendations for raising the standard of ECCE:

We can improve the standard of ECCE in India by first understanding its importance and worth. Only when we recognise its significance, give it a particular worth and make it necessary and advantageous for every child. Most parents think that Early childhood education only entails learning to read, write and communicate from a young age. They are unaware that ECCE's proper goal is developing life skills, which hinders the achievement of the real goals of ECCE (Shashtri & Rajput, 2022). Here are some suggestions for the improvement of the ECCE programme suggested by various organisations and previous studies:

- **Professional Development:** Large-scale teacher training modelled after successful programs like the ICDS-ARNEC collaboration (ARNEC, 2019).
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Leveraging private sector innovation for scalable ECCE models (Dasgupta, 2020).
- **Digital Tools:** Use of educational technology for curriculum delivery and monitoring (World Bank, 2021).

Apart from these, some general suggestions are given which can improve the quality of ECCE:

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- It is crucial to launch a national campaign emphasizing the value of ECCE. This can help to form proper awareness about ECCE among the people.
- It should be fast to prioritise the child's happiness, health and safety.
- It is necessary to enrol parents in programmes about healthy eating habits, early education, and childcare practices.
- The activities that take place at home and in school should be connected.
- Every child's unique difference must be given priority.
- Proper cooperation between the central and state governments is necessary for achieving the goal of ECCE.
- Strengthen monitoring by combining ICDS's existing grassroots infrastructure with NEP's academic framework.
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- The school health programme should be strengthened by the government.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation processes must be prioritised in the field of ECCE.

Discussion & Conclusion:



The main purpose of NEP 2020 is to transform India's education system, but its implementation faces challenges despite presenting opportunities for universal access to quality education (Biswas, 2023). Kumar (2023) explores the significance of ECCE in NEP 2020, its implementation challenges, and the vital role of teachers in promoting child development and implementing ECCE. Sardar & Miah (2024) The New Education Policy 2020 focuses on transforming Indian school education, introducing a new curriculum structure and integrating Early Childhood Care and Education. This article explores the opportunities and challenges presented by NEP 2020, providing insights into the evolution of education in India. Saikia (2024) examines its reflection in the policy, highlighting the need for quality ECCE to facilitate children's future growth and development. Education is a dynamic process that requires continuous adaptation to meet societal needs. NEP 2020 emphasizes the development of holistic individuals and highlights the importance of ECCE in laying the foundation for future educational success (Shashtri & Rajput, 2022). The above discussion reflects that NEP 2020 has tried to lay a strong foundation for ECCE in various ways. The inclusion of ECCE in NEP 2020 demonstrates a dedication to the fundamentals of education and acknowledges the importance of the formative years in influencing the child's future. The ASER Report 2024 demonstrates that children between the ages of three and five are now enrolled in preschool programs, including Anganwadis, LKG, and UKG at a significantly higher rate. 77.4% of three-year-olds children in rural areas were enrolled in early childhood education programs by 2024. In conclusion, we can say that NEP 2020 attempts to build the foundation for a strong and efficient education system by offering equitable, inclusive and high-quality education from the beginning.

This paper finds that while NEP 2020 offers a progressive vision, its successful implementation hinges on leveraging and strengthening existing structures like the ICDS. Key recommendations include integrating nutrition and pedagogy through dual certification for Anganwadi workers, developing joint institutional frameworks for curriculum and monitoring, and ensuring adequate funding and training support at the grassroots level. By aligning the strengths of ICDS with the curricular vision of NEP, India can move closer to achieving universal, inclusive, and equitable ECCE as envisioned in the SDGs. A collaborative, well-coordinated strategy is vital for ascertaining the transformative potential of early childhood education in India.

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