



National Education Policy 2020

LEAD ARTICLE

NEP-2020: Vision and Pathways

Dr Avinash Kumar Singh

FOCUS

Assessment Reforms

*Manoj Ahuja
Aanchal Chomal*



SPECIAL ARTICLE

Reinventing Teacher Education

Santosh Sarangi

Skilling Youth for Future

Santosh Yadav

Teach them Young

Shankar Maruwada

At present, there are likely to be about 100 million children between the ages of 3-6 years.¹ These years are the bridge years between home and school, critical for physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and early numeracy development - components together comprising Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). These years have the “most important influence in subsequent learning, behaviour and health.”² The damage ensued by no early learning for the majority of little children of India is no different from the devastation caused by climate change and the pandemic. Despite the setback due to the pandemic, with the trend of children returning back to schools for a brief period before the recent wave, we need to expand the opportunities to the youngest children of India, for the future depends on how our youngest children are empowered to learn and craft their own future in a fast-paced, ever changing world.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the problem for the most vulnerable children. It has become imperative to lay a solid foundation of ECCE since population trends show that India’s child population has reached a peak; hereafter we can expect a slow decline.³ Over the next decade, about 23-24 million births are expected per year.⁴ If we do the heavy lifting of educating this one generation, future generations will reap rich dividends.

Foundation for the Future

Consider the year 2040- 25 year old Raksha looks back to 2020 when the pandemic caused destruction in the lives and livelihood of her poor parents. 20 years hence, she walks the same path of uncertainty. Five year old Raksha was uncared for, had not attended any preschool and dropped out of school in class 8. She wondered what could have helped break this ‘chain of pain’ passed down from generations. She wanted her 3-year-old daughter not to live a life like hers.

For overall development, a child in the early years needs:

- Care, in the form of good health & nutrition and a safe environment, as well as,

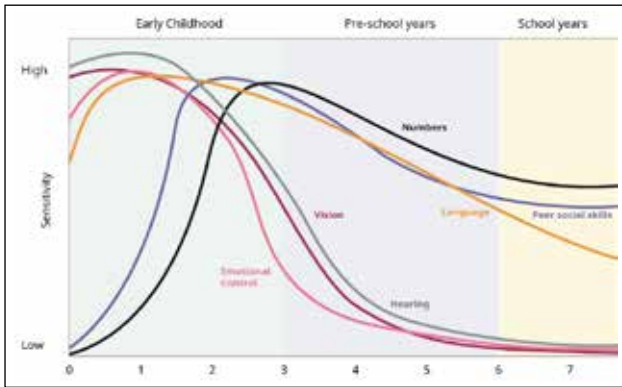
- Stimulation that fosters curiosity particularly “planned play, adult-child interactions, child-child interactions, and opportunities for holistic development”.⁵

NEP 2020 notes: “Over 85% of a child’s cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6, indicating the critical importance of appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years...”⁶

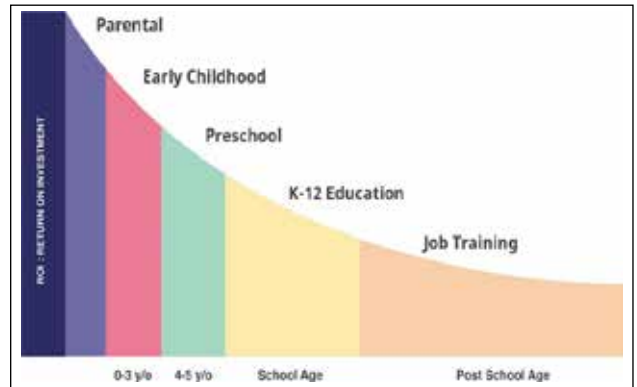
Neuroscience tells us that “a young child’s brain develops through stimulation of the sensing pathways



The author is CEO and Co-Founder of EkStep Foundation. Email: shankar@ekstep.org



Sensitive Periods for Early Development (MWCD 2013, adapted)



Heckman's Curve: Economic Impact of Early Childhood Learning (Heckman 2021)

(e.g. seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) from early experiences². A mother singing a lullaby to her child or a father playing with his child are such critical early experiences. The child's brain in these years is plastic, rapidly growing, and yearning for experiences to prepare itself for the future. Greater the number of experiences, more the neurons create neural pathways for optimal learning and development.

Child and adolescent mental health therapist Dr Shelja Sen states about the brain that:

“...the more it lights up, makes synaptic connections and builds pathways, the more complex and stronger it grows. Especially the pre-frontal cortex or the conductor of the whole neural orchestra, which seats what we call the executive skills— ability to think clearly, self regulate, manage time, organise self, be goal directed. In short— the key ingredients for optimal living.”⁷

Therefore, missing this critical window of opportunity would be to deprive the child an opportunity for learning and a better future.

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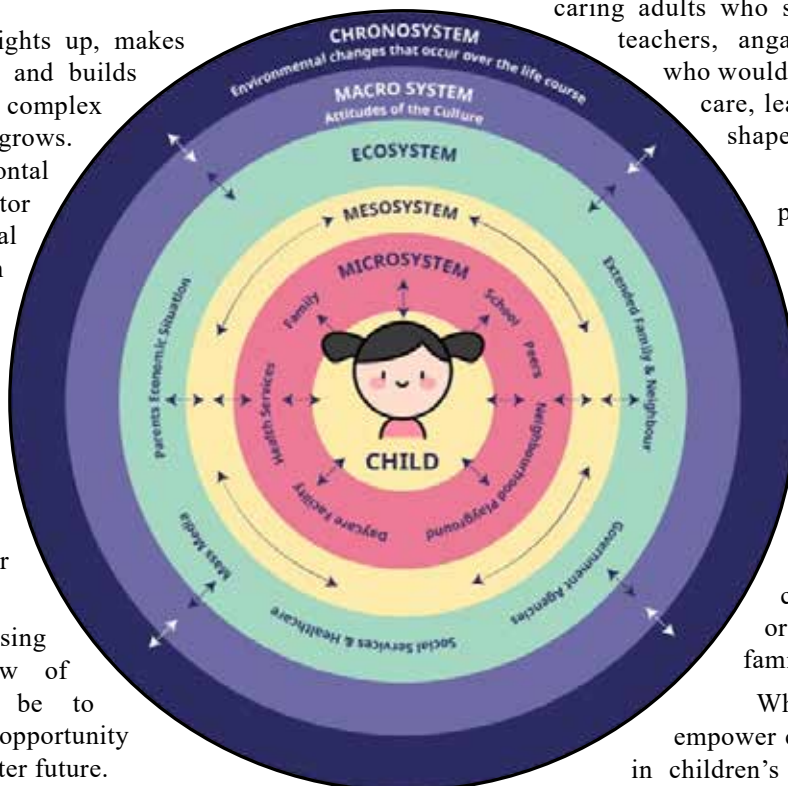
Nobel Laureate James Heckman strongly argues that investing in early childhood education produces the greatest returns in terms of human capital and ensures quality economic returns. It results in far greater returns than the same investment in schooling⁸. It thus achieves the most impact for those most impacted.

“It takes a village to raise a child.”

This adage is befitting of the early year children more than anyone else. They begin to form a sense of self but their agency is mediated by caring adults who surround them—family, teachers, anganwadi workers, etc., who would provide for their food, care, learning, and safety, and shape a sense of self.

They play with their peers in the community. Across these spaces, they learn all the time: “Children learn from anything and everything they see. They learn wherever they are, not just in special learning places”⁹. How can this be optimised for learning, at home and community, during play or interacting with the family?

What is required to empower caring adults to engage in children's early learning? What



support do these caring adults need?

ECCE in India

Decades of state effort has gone into delivering care and learning for the little child. India has, among other programmes, one of largest network of child care or *anganwadi* centres, set up under the Ministry of Women & Child Development's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme (1975), that provides a range of services, from health and nutrition to pre-school non-formal education.

Civil society organisations have played a significant role- conducting pioneering research, working extensively with States in building capacity for anganwadis and schools, spreading awareness, implementing programmes, and interventions and creating a number of practitioner resources.

In addition, private preschool, and day care services have been accessible at various price points due to increased demand particularly between 2008 and 2020.¹⁰ Despite multiple actors and a variety of interventions and initiatives, achieving quality ECCE still remains a challenge.

Unprepared Schooling

Of the nearly 25 million children born in India every year, about 99% enroll in school at the age of 5 or 6. However, as *ASER 2019: 'Early Years'* reveals, many enter school without being school-ready. Only 10.7% of children aged 5 could match pictures beginning with the same sound, and only 17.5% could complete a simple pictorial pattern.¹¹

The root cause for this, as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 points out is: "Presently, quality ECCE is not available to crores of young children,

It proposes that change be brought about through campaigns, events, etc., drawing on key insights from successful public programmes like Polio eradication and Swachh Bharat in order to make ECCE a Jan Andolan or People's movement.

particularly children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds."⁶ A strong investment in ECCE will ensure school-readiness, which is the achievement of preschool level learning outcomes across key developmental goals. These can be: 1. Children maintain good health and wellbeing, 2. Children become effective communicators, 3. Children become involved learners and connect with their immediate environment.¹²

ECCE: a core Policy imperative

The NEP 2020 has taken a big step in making ECCE a core Policy imperative:

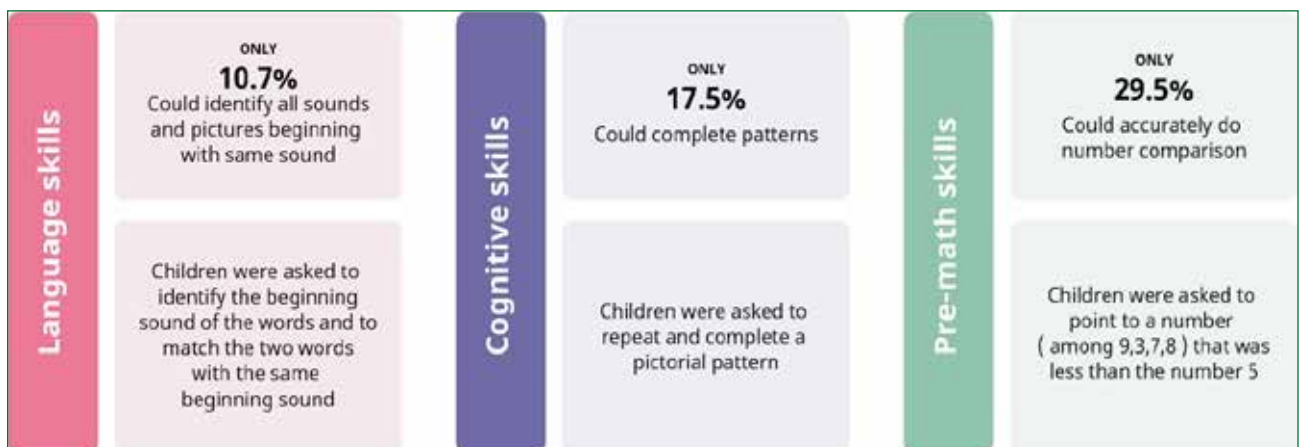
"Universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must ... be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready."⁶

Following NEP 2020, detailed guidelines for ECCE and FLN have been formulated through the National Initiative for Prociency in Reading with Understanding & Numeracy or NIPUN Bharat. These have generated a buzz in the ecosystem to create impact in the ECCE space and maximise opportunities for every child's future in India. What is critical now is implementation.

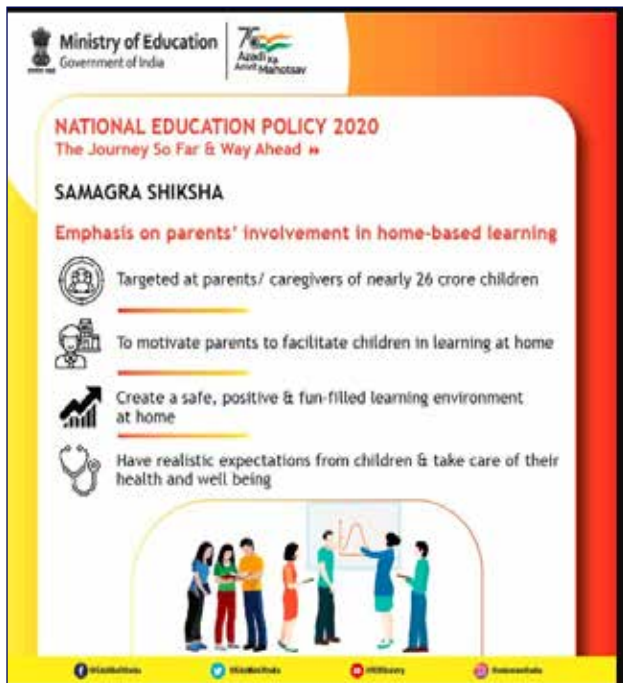
Improving ECCE

NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat emphasise the need to involve parents/family in the learning.

The current parent/caregiver mindset is "These are the days for play." NIPUN Bharat directs us to barriers such as parents/caregivers "do not have a role to play in education if they themselves are not literate, or that their role ends at sending their child to school." It proposes that change be brought about through campaigns, events, etc., drawing on key insights from successful public



How school-ready are children in India? (ASER 2020)



Ministry of Education tweet emphasising parents' involvement in children's learning (2021c)

programmes like Polio eradication and Swachh Bharat in order to make ECCE a *Jan Andolan* or People's movement.¹²

The MoE "Guidelines for Parent Participation in Home Learning" mentions a key strategy for early learning, that is to "turn every day routines into fun playful moments for learning and brain development". Underlying this conversion is the important fact that *a child is learning all the time, and therefore, play is learning*. The "Guidelines" provide an A-Z listing of moments and activities that can be conducted, for eg. Kitchen drummer: Turn over safe, shatter-proof bowls, pots, and pans to make a set of drums straight from your kitchen; Connect with nature: Encourage children to observe the flowers, trees, plants, leaves, birds, butterflies, insects in the local environment.¹³ In all this, the child is learning— while drumming, playing outside in nature, while interacting with parents/caregivers, peers, etc.

As early as the 1950s, Robert Havighurt in his book *Human Development and Education* spoke of 'teachable moments' in the context of children learning: "When the timing is right, the ability to learn a particular task will be possible. This is referred to as a 'teachable moment', or for the child, a learning moment during play, because a child is immersed in the

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activity, it carries immense potential to become optimal learning moments.

It is critical for both mother as well as father to play a role in the creation of learning moments. Though it is well recognised that it is the mother who is primarily involved in the child's learning, studies show the unique role that fathers play in the cognitive skills development of a child.¹⁴ It has been found that male caregivers report higher levels of overall satisfaction compared with female caregivers¹⁵, thus opening up an opportunity for planned interventions to involve fathers/male caregivers.

In addition to awareness, empowering caring adults to create learning moments is critical, for instance:

- Can access to local language resources (games, stories, activities etc) be enabled for caregivers, anganwadi workers, teachers?¹²
- Can the learning outcomes for preschoolers across the three developmental goals¹² be made understandable, accessible, and usable for parents? This would align with the MoE's "Guidelines" that stress the importance of parents/caregivers to measure learning progress, "For pre-schoolers monitoring of progress must be part of the activities that are conducted with them."¹² The ability to measure could serve as caregiver motivation to sustain participation in children's early learning.
- Can there be a national caregiver helpline where caring adults can get guidance, in their local language, about child development- from tips on nutrition, child care, early learning to initial assessments on developmental delays and learning difficulties?
- Can there be a platform that offers everything "Early Learning" – from curriculums, TLMs & resources, including books, toys & how-to guides for teachers, anganwadi workers, caregivers?
- Can 'words' become a means to open the world of language to children- with word activities and word games messaged to caregivers?

Technology Divide to Dividend

Technology is a means to fulfill a societal purpose. For this, technology has to mould itself to fit the needs of caring adults rather than caring adults having to mould themselves to fit technology. Technology in the ECCE space is not child facing but can become a powerful tool to empower and enable caring adults (caregivers, teachers, anganwadi workers) to

raise the quality of interactions with their children in the physical world. It can aid in the creation of more learning moments through providing relevant, usable information, and easing discovery of child resources.

Two key findings of the ASER Report 2021 on the use of technology for learning during the Covid-19 lockdown are that availability of smartphones has almost doubled from 2018-2021 and that since the lockdown, 1 in about 28 households have purchased a smartphone for studies.¹¹ This signals a critical shift in parental mindset about the use of smartphones for learning. How can this be leveraged for ECCE at home?

Language as a Resource, not Barrier

Multilingualism in the context of teaching-learning has conventionally been seen as a challenge. Can the multilingual classroom be turned into a resource rather than a barrier for learning? NEP 2020 lays emphasis on “multilingualism and the power of language” arguing for a promotion of home, local, and regional languages as “It is well understood that young children learn and grasp nontrivial concepts more quickly in their home language/mother tongue.”⁶ The UNICEF-LLF “Guidelines for Implementation of Early Learning Programs” reiterates that including children’s languages helps to promote “an equitable learning environment”, “a strong scaffold for learning the school language”, and “higher order work like thinking, reasoning and expression.”¹⁶

NEP 2020 argues for children to be exposed to multilingualism early on “as research clearly shows that children pick up languages extremely quickly between the ages of 2 and 8 and that multilingualism has great cognitive benefits to young students.”⁶ It recommends generation of textbooks, TLMs, and “enjoyable and inspirational books” in local languages to support the multilingual approach, including through technology-assisted translation.⁶

Inclusion of All

NEP 2020 advocates inclusion of all Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) at the three levels of access, participation, and learning outcomes. NEP 2020 specifically calls out that “children who come from families that are economically disadvantaged” reap the “greatest dividends” with an early childhood education. It draws attention to:

- disparities experienced by socio-cultural groups based on caste, tribe, and religion

- the need to bridge the alienation children from tribal communities experience, both culturally and academically
- certain geographical areas contain significantly larger proportions of SEDGs, and hence these areas should be declared Special Education Zones (SEZs), where all the schemes and policies are implemented to the maximum
- specially targeting girls, who cut across all underrepresented groups, making up about half of all SEDGs and as a means to secure learning for “not just in the present but also in future generations.”
- ensuring inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in ECCE, in particular through assistive devices, appropriate technology-based tools, and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials. Technology-based solutions for orientation of parents/caregivers and learning materials to actively support their children’s learning needs will be accorded priority.

- Support to teachers to sense & identify learning disabilities early and plan for their mitigation. Not the least, it emphasises a change in school culture to remove biases and stereotypes in order to develop respect for diversity.⁶

Conclusion

Now is the moment in India to target the challenge of quality early childhood education. With a

decreasing child demographic, the problem is a solvable one. Despite the setback due to the pandemic, with the trend of children now returning back to schools, we need to expand the opportunities to the youngest children of India, for the future depends on how our youngest children are empowered to learn and craft their own future in a fast-paced, ever changing world. Policy intent exists, what is now required is an ecosystem to create, contribute, and leverage building blocks required to create diverse solutions and resources as public goods for the sake of the early years child. □

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you only need one

Lifes cluttered. So is your phone.
Too many accounts. Forgotten passwords.
An army of attention-seeking apps.

For you though, less is more.
Shopping sprees and banking.
Hunger pangs and your love for travel.
You want it all, in one single tap.

So why fuss over many, when all you need is one app?



My Dreams



Shop Online



Spend Analysis



Transfer Funds



Instant Loans



Order Food



Just-for-you Deals



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डेस्कटॉप, टैब्लेट्स और स्मार्टफोन्स के लिए उपलब्ध.

