

EMBRACING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive Education (IE) is a novel method of educating children with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers within the same educational setting. The Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) describes inclusion as a commitment to guaranteeing that each student is provided with education in their assigned school and classroom, to the highest degree possible. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 2005 and the SEN and Disability Act (SENDA) of 2001 aim to prevent discrimination between disabled and non-disabled children, ensuring equal access to educational and infrastructural resources. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), introduced by the Union Cabinet of India on July 29, 2020, significantly expands the scope of Inclusive Education. Chapter 6 of NEP 2020 focuses on Equitable and Inclusive Education, emphasizing that education is a powerful tool for achieving social justice and equality. The policy highlights the importance of ensuring that no child in India is deprived of learning opportunities and success due to their background or circumstances of birth. According to MHRD statistics from 2009, approximately 80% of the rural population in India lacks access to special schools, and an estimated 8 million children are out of school due to factors such as caste, gender, poverty, and disability. Research on Inclusive Education and NEP 2020 underscores the necessity for further studies on key areas such as the challenges and obstacles to inclusive education in India, the attitudes of stakeholders like students, teachers, parents, and the public towards IE, the main issues faced by educational institutions in implementing IE, and the advantages and disadvantages of IE within NEP 2020.

Keywords: Disabilities, Children with Special Needs Gender Equality, Inclusive Education, NEP 2020.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of their race, religion, gender, disability, status, caste, creed, or income. Its purpose is to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities and to eliminate barriers and discrimination in public life. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) was approved by the Union Cabinet of India on July 29, 2020, and it outlines the vision for India's new

education system. It provides a comprehensive framework for education, from elementary to higher education, as well as vocational training in both rural and urban areas of India. The goal of the policy is to transform India's education system by 2040.

Following the release of the policy, the government clarified that no one would be compelled to study a specific language, and there would be no shift from English to any regional language as the medium of instruction. The language policy in NEP serves as a broad guideline and advisory, and it is the responsibility of states, institutions, and schools to decide on its implementation. Education in India is a Concurrent List subject, and the country has made significant progress in terms of education infrastructure and student enrollment in recent years. The enrollment rate in the upper primary level (Class 6-8) has witnessed a significant boost, thanks to the implementation of the Right to Education Act in 2009. Nationally, between 2009 and 2016, there was a 19.4 percent increase in the number of students at the upper primary level. The implementation of sanitation and safety initiatives has also played a role in sustaining this enrollment across the country. The literacy rate of women in the Census 2011 was documented at 65.5%. For Muslims, it had increased to 68.5%, and for Scheduled Caste communities, it had reached around 66%. Despite notable advancements in various key areas, the education systems in India are still facing difficulties related to inequality and exclusion. The majority of the rural population and the vulnerable and marginalized groups still struggle to access quality school education. This issue is even more pronounced in the higher education sector.

THE FUNDAMENTAL DISSEMINATION OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020

- I. The NEP 2020 has set ambitious goals for education, aiming to provide universal education from preschool to secondary level and achieve a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in school education by 2030. This means that every child will have access to quality education, regardless of their background or circumstances.
- II. NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of implementing an open schooling system to address the issue of 2 crore out-of-school children and bring them back into the mainstream education system. This system will provide flexible learning opportunities for those who have dropped out or have not been able to attend regular schools, ensuring that they too have access to education and can acquire the necessary skills for their future.
- III. In lieu of the existing 10+2 system, a fresh 5+3+3+4 curricular framework will be implemented, accommodating various age groups: 3-8, 8-11, 11-14,

and 14-18 years. This restructuring will bring the previously uncovered age group of 3-6 years under the school curriculum. This is a significant development as this age group is globally recognized as a crucial stage for the development of a child's mental faculties.

- IV. Overall, the NEP 2020 highlights the commitment to providing inclusive and holistic education for all children. By focusing on universalization, open schooling, and a revised curricular structure, the policy aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive a quality education and develop their full potential. The updated system will feature a 12-year schooling structure, incorporating three years of Anganwadi or pre-schooling.
- V. The focus will be on foundational literacy and numeracy, with no rigid separation between academic, extracurricular, and vocational streams in schools. Vocational education will begin from Class 6 and include internships to provide practical experience. Additionally, teaching up to Grade 5 will be conducted in the mother tongue or regional language, without imposing any language on students.
- VI. Assessment reforms will be implemented with the introduction of a 360-degree holistic progress card, which will track student progress towards achieving learning outcomes.
- VII. A new National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, NCFTE 2021, will be formulated by the NCTE in consultation with NCERT. This framework will provide comprehensive guidelines for teacher education.
- VIII. By 2030, all teachers will be required to hold a 4-year integrated B.Ed. degree as the minimum qualification, thereby ensuring their readiness and expertise in the field of education.
- IX. With the introduction of 3.5 crore extra seats, the gross enrolment ratio in higher education is set to reach 50% by 2035. This strategic move will open up more avenues for students to engage in advanced studies.
- X. The policy aims to establish a broad-based, multi-disciplinary, and holistic undergraduate program. This program will have flexible curricula, creative combinations of subjects, integration of vocational education, and multiple entry and exit points with appropriate certification.
- XI. An Academic Bank of Credits will be established to facilitate the transfer of credits between institutions, making it easier for students to switch courses or pursue interdisciplinary studies.
- XII. Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) are being established as prime examples of exceptional multidisciplinary education within the nation. These universities will be equivalent to prestigious institutions such as IITs and IIMs, offering education of global standards.

- XIII. The National Research Foundation will be established as an apex body to promote a strong research culture and build research capacity across higher education institutions. This will encourage innovation and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in various fields.
- XIV. HECI is being established to oversee higher education in India, with four distinct verticals for regulation, standard-setting, funding, and accreditation.
- XV. Both public and private higher education institutions will be subject to the same regulations, accreditation processes, and academic standards.
- XVI. The plan includes phasing out college affiliations over 15 years and implementing a gradual process for colleges to attain graded autonomy, aiming for each college to eventually become autonomous or a constituent college of a university.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (IE)

Inclusive education ensures that both children and their parents have the right to access mainstream education where the needs of the children and the desires of the parents are met. It is a modern approach to educating children with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers in the same learning environment. In inclusive classrooms, there is a diverse mix of students with varying learning styles, talents, abilities, and levels of functioning. This approach includes a wide range of students, such as typical learners, those with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, multiple disorders, visual or hearing impairments, and transgender students. Many educational institutions have taken steps towards inclusive education, and research has shown that it leads to significant improvements in the quality of education. All students, regardless of their challenges, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes in their local schools to receive high-quality instruction, interventions, and support that help them succeed in the curriculum.

FOCUS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NEP 2020

The National Education Policy emphasizes the importance of ensuring inclusive and equitable education for socially and economically disadvantaged groups. These groups, known as Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), are identified based on various factors such as gender identities (female and transgender), socio-cultural identities (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs, and minorities), varied geographical backgrounds of students from villages, small towns, and districts, coupled with the diverse socio-economic conditions of migrant communities, low-income households, poor situations, orphans, beggars, and the urban poor, contribute to the rich tapestry of our society. Special Education Zones will be established to cater to the needs of these disadvantaged groups. Recent research reveals a significant drop in school admissions from Grade 1 to Grade 12 among socio-economically disadvantaged groups (NEP 2020, 6.2). As per U-DISE

2016-17 figures, approximately 19.6% of students are from impoverished backgrounds like orphans, beggars, urban poor, and similar categories. At the primary level, 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes, the percentage decreases to 17.3%. Dropout rates are particularly high for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), differently-abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), and even more so for female students (NEP 2020, 6.2.1). NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary education to ensure the holistic development of students.

Numerous researchers have undertaken extensive surveys and examined relevant literature on Inclusive Education and its effects on educational institutions, students, parents, teachers, and the general public. Through their efforts, they have arrived at significant conclusions, highlighting the importance of this topic. The introduction of NEP 2020 has further expanded the scope of Inclusive Education, replacing Integrated Special Education. This review paper delves into the subject of Inclusive Education, presenting diverse perspectives from various research scholars in different contexts, ultimately aiming to reach a shared consensus.

SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS (SEDGS)

The NEP 2020 acknowledges the significant underrepresentation of certain groups within the current educational systems. In order to address their unique educational requirements, the NEP has combined gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions to form a new social group known as SEDGs. The policy primarily focuses on promoting inclusivity for these groups. As previously mentioned, these groups face higher dropout rates due to various factors, including limited accessibility for tribal communities (geographic) and historical exclusion of communities based on socio-cultural identities.

To cater to their specific needs, the NEP 2020 proposes a range of policies and initiatives, such as targeted scholarships and conditional cash transfers to encourage parents to send their children to school. Additionally, providing bicycles for transportation, which has proven effective in increasing enrollment rates in the past, is also recommended to enhance representation.

RECOGNITION OF GENDERED IDENTITIES IN NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 acknowledges that women and transgender individuals from all social and economic backgrounds are the most adversely affected. To address this, plans are in place to implement initiatives such as providing bicycles to form cycling groups and creating walking groups to schools, encouraging community

participation and ensuring the safety of these vulnerable students. Additionally, recognizing the critical need for education for girls, the new policy proposes the establishment of a 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' to create better educational environments for women and transgender individuals.

This fund will be accessible to states to develop systems that facilitate the inclusion of these students. It will support initiatives such as sanitation provisions, conditional cash transfers, bicycle distribution schemes, and more. Furthermore, the funds will enable states to promote and expand effective community-based interventions that address specific barriers faced by female and transgender children in accessing and participating in education. In line with this, the policy suggests the establishment of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya to provide improved boarding facilities, overcoming geographical obstacles to education.

However, despite these innovative ideas and proposals, the NEP falls short in addressing the fundamental issues of inclusivity and the conversations that are lacking in the current schooling systems. Historically, school curriculums have failed to address discrimination based on sexual identification and orientation, as well as the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals in the workplace. The basic respect that should be accorded to all citizens is regrettably withheld from these individuals. Although Article 377 has been abolished by the judiciary, discussions surrounding identity are still considered taboo, resulting in numerous instances of discrimination against these individuals in the past.

According to the recent press release by CBSE, there were 18,89,878 candidates in class 10 and 1,206,893 candidates in class 12. Among the students who registered for the class 10 exam, 788,195 were girls, 1,101,664 were boys, and only 19 were transgender persons. In class 12, there were 522,819 girls, 684,068 boys, and six transgender persons. This data clearly highlights the significant numerical disparity, making transgender individuals the most underrepresented minority in our education system.

The stark difference in numbers serves as a strong indication that transgender individuals face disproportionately high barriers. Unfortunately, the new policy fails to address how it intends to increase enrollment for these students or provide solutions to the discrimination they encounter within educational institutions. This discrimination often leads to disproportionately high dropout rates among transgender students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The policy acknowledges children with special needs and advocates for their inclusion in mainstream education systems. It aligns with the objectives of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016. Additionally, the policy aims to hire special educators in all school complexes to ensure that teaching is more

inclusive and responsive to the needs of children. Children with significant disabilities will have the option to pursue home schooling and will be provided with skilled educators who can facilitate their learning and provide them with the best educational opportunities. Furthermore, teachers will receive training to identify learning disabilities in children at an early stage and support them in their education and mental well-being. To create fair assessment systems for children with learning disabilities, the National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, will be established. The policy also proposes alternative schooling models to advance this objective.

However, the NEP's ambitions and ideals in this regard may be overly optimistic. It fails to acknowledge that not only are most teachers ill-equipped for such specialized roles, but also that a significant number of schools in India suffer from severe staff shortages. The policy also lacks clarity on how it plans to create accessible mechanisms for home schooling. For example, a recent evaluation conducted by the Delhi Child Rights Commission revealed that 60% of schools reported no students with disabilities, while another 28% reported less than 1% of such students.

It emphasizes that individuals with disabilities are poised to face negative socio-economic consequences compared to those without disabilities. The recent policy lacks a clear plan on ensuring accessibility to education for all individuals. Furthermore, it does not outline the necessary adjustments to the curriculum to ensure that students with learning disabilities are not marginalized in the highly competitive educational settings prevalent in Indian schools today.

FORMATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL ZONES

One of the notable recommendations of the NEP involves the establishment of Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in regions with a significant population of Socio Economically Disadvantaged Groups and in aspirational districts. The primary objective is to enhance educational outreach in the most remote and underserved areas of India. This will be achieved through the allocation of additional resources and the coordination of various schemes and programs by both the Central and state governments to uplift these underdeveloped regions.

While this concept is innovative and shows potential to improve educational opportunities in hard-to-reach areas, the policy lacks clarity on the criteria for identifying these zones and how they will be differentiated in urban and rural settings. The policy does not provide a clear framework for determining the key factors involved.

UPSHOTS OF NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 mandates the establishment of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities that will be on par with the renowned IITs and IIMs. These universities are designed to introduce a multidisciplinary academic approach. The

same accreditation and regulatory standards will apply to both public and private educational institutions. Colleges will gradually move towards autonomy and away from affiliations. By 2030, a four-year B. Ed degree will be a prerequisite for individuals pursuing a career in teaching. To better prepare students for potential future pandemics, online learning will be encouraged on a larger scale. The outcomes of new education policy are as follows:

- Achieving universal access to quality education from early childhood care and education (ECCE) to secondary education by the year 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4).
- Implementing a National Mission by 2025 to ensure that all children acquire foundational learning and numeracy skills.
- Ensuring 100% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in pre-school to secondary level education by the year 2030.
- Confronting the challenge of out-of-school children and endeavoring to reintroduce a significant number of 20 million children back into the educational framework.
- Equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to assessment reforms by the year 2023.
- Establishing an inclusive and equitable education system by the year 2030, where every child has equal access to education regardless of their background or abilities.
- Introducing board exams that assess not only the memorization of facts but also the understanding and application of core concepts.
- Ensuring that every child who completes their schooling is proficient in at least one skill.
- Implementing common standards of learning in both public and private schools to ensure quality education for all students.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education aims to bridge the gap between students with special educational needs and those without, fostering the development of social interaction skills among special needs students through exposure to a diverse social environment while eliminating the necessity for special schools. Despite its noble intentions, inclusive education encounters various challenges in practice today. A recent study in the Swedish special education context delves into special educators' experiences, opportunities, and obstacles in implementing inclusive pedagogy in the context of social justice. The study highlights positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms, yet also identifies several areas of ambiguity that must be addressed to establish socially and cognitively inclusive learning environments. The primary obstacles to inclusive education include special educational needs, attitudinal

barriers, curriculum design, untrained teachers, and infrastructural limitations. The successful implementation of inclusive education hinges on the active participation of school management, administrators, teachers, and parents of both typical and differently abled children. Embracing inclusive education is crucial in fulfilling our constitutional obligations and nurturing responsible citizenship and self-reliance in the modern educational landscape.

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