



Transforming Teacher Education for the Foundational Stage: ECCE

Perspectives under NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) serves as the cornerstone of comprehensive child development, nurturing cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical growth during the formative years between ages 3 and 8. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies this Foundational Stage as pivotal for lifelong learning and social inclusion, emphasizing the reform of teacher education to cultivate professionals adept in child-centered, play-based, inclusive, and culturally grounded pedagogies. This study employs a descriptive and analytical framework, drawing upon policy documents, scholarly research, and international ECCE models to evaluate the current landscape, challenges, and emerging opportunities in foundational teacher education across India. The analysis reveals significant gaps in curricular design, teacher preparation, and on-ground execution, alongside the pressing need to harmonize global best practices—such as the Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and High Scope approaches—with India's indigenous educational traditions and cultural ethos. The paper concludes that re-envisioning teacher education in alignment with NEP 2020 is vital for establishing an equitable and dynamic ECCE system that promotes holistic development, stimulates creativity, and nurtures confident, compassionate, and lifelong learners.

Keywords: - Foundational Stage; Teacher Education, Child-Centered Pedagogy, Holistic Development, Inclusive Learning.

1.0 Introduction:

Education is the cornerstone of a nation's progress, guiding societies toward enlightenment, equity, and sustainable development. It is the very essence of human freedom, dignity, and democratic engagement. For a country to evolve harmoniously, education must reach every individual, leaving no section of society excluded. Despite constitutional guarantees and numerous policy initiatives supporting the Right to Education, India continues



to face challenges in realizing it as a developmental and transformative right, especially among socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings a renewed vision to this challenge by redefining education as a holistic, inclusive, and learner-centered process that begins at the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8). It recognizes Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the bedrock of lifelong learning, social justice, and equitable growth. Therefore, teacher education for this crucial stage must be redesigned to meet the emotional, cognitive, and developmental needs of young learners through experiential, play-based, and inclusive methods that celebrate diversity and creativity. (Negi B., & Shukla S., 2024)

Education serves dual purposes—it fosters individual growth while simultaneously driving social transformation. From a sociological viewpoint, education must evolve alongside society's changing needs. In a pluralistic and democratic country like India, teacher preparation must empower educators to nurture constitutional ideals such as equality, fraternity, and secularism from the earliest years of schooling. Foundational teachers, in particular, should be equipped to integrate language diversity, cultural richness, and gender inclusivity into their classrooms, creating learning spaces that reflect the ethos of social justice and harmony. (Singh, M, Khan, S. M., & Waseem, M. , 2024) The NEP 2020 proposes an integrated and practice-based model of teacher education that combines theoretical insight with experiential learning. This reform emphasizes early childhood development, formative and continuous assessment, and inclusive teaching approaches. Teachers at this level are envisioned as facilitators of exploration and empathy—guides who inspire curiosity, compassion, and critical thinking rather than simply transmit knowledge. By prioritizing ECCE, the policy highlights how strong early education can disrupt cycles of poverty, inequality, and exclusion, empowering children from all backgrounds to reach their full potential. (Gerhardt, 2015).

Redefining teacher education for the foundational stage is, therefore, an investment in the nation's human capital at its most critical stage of formation. Skilled foundational educators can serve as bridges of equality, nurturing both cognitive and emotional growth that underpins all later learning. As emphasized in NEP 2020, early education goes beyond preparing children for formal schooling—it lays the moral, intellectual, and emotional foundation of nation-building, ensuring that every child grows into an empowered, creative, and responsible citizen.



1.1 Concept of Education:

Education is an ongoing process that encompasses the complete growth of an individual—physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral. It equips people to lead purposeful lives and actively participate in the progress of society and the nation.³ The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions education, (Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2013) particularly at the Foundational Stage, as a dynamic means of cultivating curiosity, creativity, and core human values through Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). (Habbir, S. W., & Afsan N., 2022)

a. Indian Concept

In the Indian philosophical tradition, *Shiksha* is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the pursuit of self-realization and the building of character. The ancient *Gurukul* system emphasized an education deeply rooted in *Sanskaras*—values such as discipline, humility, respect, and compassion. (Saha, 2024) Learning was holistic, blending moral, spiritual, and practical dimensions of life. Reflecting this heritage, NEP 2020 promotes ethical and value-based education from the earliest years, aiming to develop well-rounded and morally responsible individuals.

b. Western Concept

Western educational thought highlights rational inquiry, personal freedom, and child-centered learning. Philosophers like Rousseau, Froebel, and Montessori viewed education as a process of nurturing the child's natural potential and intrinsic curiosity. Their approaches advocate learning through exploration and experience. NEP 2020 resonates with these ideas by encouraging play-based, experiential, and discovery-oriented pedagogy at the foundational level, ensuring that every child learns through active engagement with their environment. (Ministry_of_Education, 2021)

c. Religious Concept:

The religious view of education focuses on spiritual and moral development, fostering virtues such as honesty, kindness, patience, and self-control. In the context of ECCE, these principles manifest through activities that nurture empathy, cooperation, and ethical awareness among young learners. This moral grounding forms the basis for lifelong emotional and social development. In essence, education—whether interpreted



through Indian, Western, or religious perspectives—centers on the complete growth of the individual. The Indian viewpoint stresses self-realization and moral refinement; the Western perspective emphasizes intellectual independence and creativity; while the religious approach nurtures ethical and emotional maturity. (UNICEF, 2019), The NEP 2020, through its focus on ECCE, integrates these diverse traditions into a unified vision of early education. By reimagining teacher education to align with this framework, the policy prepares educators to inspire curiosity, compassion, creativity, and critical thinking. Thus, ECCE under NEP 2020 emerges as a transformative foundation for lifelong learning, social inclusion, and the holistic development of every child.

1.2 Evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India

The journey of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India has undergone remarkable transformation over the decades. Although the early years of a child's life have always been deeply valued in Indian culture and family traditions, their educational significance has gained systematic recognition only in recent times. Historically, early learning took place within the home and community, where children absorbed moral values, social skills, and cultural practices through interaction and observation. However, with socio-cultural and demographic changes, the approach to early education gradually shifted from informal, family-based methods to more structured, institution-oriented systems of learning. (Kaul, V., Ramachandran, C., & Upadhyaya, G.C. , 1994) Modern ECCE in India owes much to pioneering educators such as Giju bhai Badheka and Tara bai Modak, who were instrumental in conceptualizing child-centered education during the early twentieth century. Both emphasized that young children learn best in their mother tongue and within a familiar cultural and social context.

They believed that education should not be detached from the community but rather should involve active participation from families and society. (Kaul, V., Ramachandran, C., & Upadhyaya, G.C. , 1994) According to them, language serves as the key medium for self-expression, and when children communicate in their native tongue, they express thoughts and emotions freely. Giju bhai Badheka introduced a story-based curriculum that nurtured creativity, emotional understanding, and language



development. Drawing inspiration from Maria Montessori, he viewed early education as the foundational step toward building a strong and enlightened nation.

Tara bai Modak, on the other hand, played a vital role in extending early education beyond classrooms by promoting community-based ECCE initiatives. She emphasized practical learning experiences that connected education with real-life situations, especially for children in rural and underprivileged areas. (Rao. N., & Sun, J. , 2015) While English missionaries had introduced kindergarten models inspired by Friedrich Froebel in some parts of India during the late nineteenth century, the first truly indigenous preschool was established by Giju bhai Badheka in 1916. Tara bai Modak further advanced this movement by founding the Nutan Balshikshan Sangh (New Childhood Education Society) in 1925. Her Vikaswadi Centre in Kosbad later became a pioneering example for community-driven early education programmes across India. The evolution of ECCE gained further momentum through Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of *Pre-Basic* and *Basic Education* and was strengthened by Maria Montessori's visit to India in 1939, which inspired the integration of play-based and child-centered learning into Indian educational thought. (Rao N. , 2010) Thus, the evolution of ECCE in India represents a synthesis of traditional wisdom, community participation, and progressive educational philosophy. It reflects India's ongoing effort to create an inclusive, culturally grounded, and developmentally appropriate foundation for lifelong learning.

1.3 Other Global Ideas that Have Shaped Foundational Stage Education

Globally, early childhood education has been shaped by influential thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, and Maria Montessori, each emphasizing experience, interaction, and exploration as the cornerstones of learning. John Dewey believed that education should grow from children's natural interests and everyday experiences. (Nido, 2017) He stressed that learning becomes meaningful when it connects with a child's immediate environment, encouraging teachers to design activities that relate to their daily lives. Friedrich Froebel, known as the "father of kindergarten," promoted learning through play and sensory exploration. He viewed play as the highest form of self-expression and creativity, where teachers



act as gentle guides rather than instructors, nurturing curiosity through purposeful activities. (NCERT, 2020)

In the twentieth century, developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and Howard Gardner expanded understanding of how children learn. Piaget described learning as an active process of building and reshaping knowledge through experience. Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social interaction, proposing that children learn best within their *Zone of Proximal Development*—when guided by adults or peers who help them reach higher levels of understanding. This idea supports collaborative and mixed-age learning environments. (Morrison, 2012). Jerome Bruner introduced the idea that children represent knowledge in three forms—through actions, images, and symbols. His “spiral curriculum” suggested revisiting concepts at increasing levels of difficulty, helping children build deeper comprehension over time. These theories collectively inspired experiential, sensory, and creative learning practices in early childhood education. In India, educators combined these global ideas with traditional methods involving play, rhythm, music, art, and storytelling.¹³ Together, they emphasize that foundational education should be joyful, engaging, and rooted in children’s natural ways of exploring and making sense of their world.

1.4 Laying Strong Foundations: Transforming Teacher Education through ECCE and NEP 2020

Children are the cornerstone of a nation’s progress, and their early years shape the foundation of lifelong learning, character formation, and holistic development. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8) as a decisive period that influences a child’s intellectual, emotional, and social trajectory. (NCERT, 2020) It places Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) at the heart of this process, promoting a pedagogy that is play-based, activity-oriented, inclusive, and experiential. Transforming teacher education is key to realizing this vision. Educators must possess a deep understanding of child psychology, developmental principles, inclusive pedagogy, and interdisciplinary learning. NEP 2020 advocates for integrated teacher education programs that merge theoretical insights with practical exposure,



enabling teachers to act as facilitators of inquiry, empathy, and creativity rather than passive transmitters of content. (Menon, S. & Das, H. V. , 2019) In the Indian context, traditional nurturing practices—such as storytelling, folk songs, rhythmic play, and cultural games—have long fostered imagination, values, and emotional intelligence among children. Reviving and embedding these culturally rooted methods within teacher preparation enriches modern ECCE frameworks and ensures the continuity of indigenous pedagogical wisdom. High-quality early education not only prepares children for formal schooling but also acts as an equalizing force that reduces socio-economic disparities. Ultimately, NEP 2020 redefines teacher education as a transformative endeavor—one that empowers educators to cultivate the foundational capacities for lifelong learning and human flourishing.

Through skilled and compassionate teachers, the policy envisions an equitable, inclusive, and forward-looking society grounded in strong early educational experiences.

1.5 Aligning Teacher Education in India with Global Best Practices through NEP 2020 for ECCE

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant paradigm shift in India's approach to teacher education, harmonizing it with global models of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Recognizing the foundational years (ages 3–8) as vital to holistic development, the policy aims to prepare educators capable of creating inclusive, experiential, and child-centered learning environments. (Menon, S. & Das, H. V. , 2019)

1.6 Key Global Alignments:

i. Holistic and Multidisciplinary Preparation:

Teacher education now integrates diverse domains—child development, psychology, pedagogy, and inclusive education—reflecting the interdisciplinary focus seen in leading global systems. This ensures that educators understand children as whole beings with distinct interests, learning patterns, and developmental needs.



ii. Play-Based and Experiential Pedagogy:

Drawing from international frameworks such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and High Scope, NEP 2020 prioritizes play, exploration, and discovery as central to learning. Teachers are trained to design interactive experiences that nurture creativity (Menon, S. & Das, H. V. , 2019) critical thinking, and emotional intelligence rather than relying on rote instruction.

iii. Continuous Professional Growth:

Ongoing capacity-building through workshops, digital modules, and mentoring programs ensures teachers remain up to date with evolving pedagogies and technological innovations. This continuous engagement bridges the gap between policy vision and classroom practice.

iv. Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Practices:

Teacher preparation under NEP emphasizes equity, diversity, and sensitivity to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By addressing the needs of marginalized and differently-abled learners, Indian teacher education aligns with global commitments to inclusive and socially just education.

v. Reflective Assessment and Adaptive Pedagogy:

The policy promotes formative, evidence-based assessment and reflective teaching, enabling educators to adapt strategies to children's developmental progress and learning styles. (V., 2019) Through these alignments, NEP 2020 transforms Indian teacher education into a globally informed yet locally grounded system, ensuring that children experience joyful, equitable, and meaningful early learning. This integration of global standards with Indian ethos strengthens the foundation of lifelong learning and shapes empathetic, confident, and socially responsible individuals.

vi. Meeting the Actual Needs of Learners in ECCE

In early childhood education, addressing the individual needs of learners is as essential as serving the right nourishment to the body. Imagine a child who desires a rasgola but receives alado, or a family asking for a half portion but being served a full plate—the mismatch, though minor, results in dissatisfaction. Similarly, when an



education system overlooks the developmental needs, interests, or pace of young learners, it fails to serve its true purpose. Rigid, standardized models that impose uniform lessons and pacing often ignore children's individuality. The NEP 2020 responds to this challenge by promoting child-centered, play-based, and experiential approaches, ensuring that every learner's curiosity, ability, and pace are respected. Learning becomes a joyful exploration rather than a mechanical task. (Preschool Curriculum Framework, 2021) Teacher education, therefore, is being redesigned to prepare educators who can observe, assess, and respond to each child's unique developmental profile. Teachers learn to design flexible, need-based experiences that foster exploration, creativity, and emotional expression. Just as the right portion satisfies hunger, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant learning experiences satisfy a child's intellectual and emotional growth.

By meeting learners where they are, ECCE lays the foundation for curiosity, resilience, and a lifelong love for learning—nurturing not just academic competence but the full spectrum of human potential. (A. L., 2004)

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine the significance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the foundation of lifelong learning and holistic development, shaping the cognitive, emotional, social, and moral growth of young children.
2. To analyze the vision and policy framework of NEP 2020 in transforming teacher education at the foundational stage and its implications for pedagogical innovation and inclusivity.
3. To compare and contrast India's teacher education framework with global models and best practices in ECCE, highlighting points of alignment, divergence, and potential adaptation.
4. To evaluate the current status, implementation gaps, and challenges in ECCE across India, particularly in terms of accessibility, quality of instruction, teacher preparedness, and inclusiveness.
5. To identify effective strategies for strengthening teacher education programs, ensuring that educators acquire the competencies necessary for child-centered, play-based, experiential, and inclusive pedagogy as envisioned in NEP 2020.



6. To examine the role of key government schemes and institutional frameworks—including ICDS, Samagra Shiksha, and NCERT guidelines—in promoting and supporting foundational learning and early education.
7. To propose policy and institutional reforms for enhancing teacher preparation and ECCE delivery systems, with the goal of achieving internationally benchmarked standards of quality, equity, and holistic child development in India's foundational education stage.

3. Research Questions

1. In what ways does Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) at the foundational stage foster the holistic growth and overall personality development of young learners?
2. What are the major provisions and policy directions outlined in NEP 2020 concerning the reformation of teacher education for the foundational stage and early learning?
3. To what extent do existing teacher education programs in India incorporate and promote child-centered, play-based, and inclusive approaches in the context of ECCE?
4. How do India's teacher preparation models and pedagogical practices compare and correspond with global frameworks and best practices in early childhood education?
5. What strategic measures and policy interventions can be adopted to strengthen teacher education, ensuring equitable access and quality delivery of ECCE at the foundational stage?

4. Methods and Procedure

The present study employs a descriptive and analytical research methodology to explore the transformation of teacher education for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.¹⁸ The research aims to critically examine policy directions, current teacher preparation practices, existing challenges, and their alignment with international standards. This study is conceptual in nature and does not involve the collection of primary or field-based data.

5. Research Design

A desk-based analytical design has been adopted, relying primarily on a comprehensive review of existing literature, government policy documents, and scholarly research related to ECCE, teacher education, and NEP 2020. The design further includes a comparative evaluation of Indian practices with globally recognized models of early childhood education to identify



key parallels, divergences, and potential areas for reform. (Barrett, P., Treves, A., Shmis, T., Ambasz, D., & Ustinova, M., 2019)

Sources of Data

The study is grounded in **secondary data**, collected from credible and authoritative sources.

Secondary Data

- **Policy Frameworks and Reports:** Documents such as the *National Education Policy (2020)*, *NCTE guidelines*, *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)*, and *Samagra Shiksha* reports.
- **Academic and Scholarly Literature:** Books, peer-reviewed journals, research papers, and institutional reports focusing on ECCE, foundational learning, and teacher education reforms.
- **Global Frameworks and Standards:** International models, policy frameworks, and case studies on best practices in early childhood education and teacher preparation.

6. Tools and Techniques

- **Document Analysis:** Used to examine and interpret educational policies, curricular frameworks, and institutional guidelines to understand their implications for ECCE and teacher education.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Applied to identify recurring themes such as play-based learning, inclusive pedagogy, and child-centered approaches in the reviewed materials.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Conducted to assess India's teacher education framework in relation to global benchmarks, highlighting both strengths and areas requiring policy or pedagogical enhancement.

7. Procedure

The research followed a structured process designed to ensure a comprehensive and analytical understanding of the topic.

- A systematic review was undertaken of relevant scholarly literature, government policies, and institutional frameworks related to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and teacher education.
- Key themes, patterns, and challenges concerning foundational-stage teacher preparation were identified through critical examination of documents and reports.



- A comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate India's teacher education framework against global models, drawing meaningful insights and recommendations for strengthening ECCE practices within the context of NEP 2020.

8. Results and Discussion

The analysis of academic literature, NEP 2020 guidelines, and international best practices provides several significant observations regarding the current state and future direction of teacher education for ECCE in India.

I. ECCE as the Foundational Stage

The NEP 2020 underscores early childhood (ages 3–8) as the most crucial stage for comprehensive development—encompassing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth. This view aligns with global educational research that identifies the early years as the foundation for lifelong learning. The findings reaffirm the need for specialized teacher education programs designed explicitly for this developmental phase.

ii. Existing Gaps in Teacher Education

Although initiatives like Samagra Shiksha and ICDS have contributed to strengthening early education, significant gaps remain in teacher preparation. Many existing training curricula lack sufficient emphasis on child-centered, experiential, and inclusive pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, areas such as developmental psychology, formative assessment, and activity-based learning require greater integration—mirroring the priorities seen in advanced global education systems.

iii. Convergence with Global Best Practices

International frameworks such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and HighScope advocate experiential, inquiry-driven, and reflective teaching methods. NEP 2020 mirrors these principles by promoting play-based learning, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness. This alignment demonstrates India's commitment to harmonizing its ECCE system with internationally recognized educational standards while contextualizing them to local needs.

iv. Need for Systemic Transformation

The findings indicate that a comprehensive restructuring of teacher education is necessary to fulfill NEP 2020's vision. Key strategies include curriculum modernization, continuous professional development, and the integration of indigenous cultural practices



within contemporary pedagogical frameworks. Emphasizing inclusivity, creativity, and practical training will ensure that teacher education evolves from traditional models to transformative, learner-oriented systems.

9. Implications for Quality and Equity in ECCE

A robust and well-prepared teaching workforce forms the cornerstone of quality and equitable ECCE. When teachers are trained to address children's developmental needs through inclusive and engaging methods, learning outcomes improve significantly. Strengthening teacher education in alignment with NEP 2020 and global practices can bridge disparities in access, enhance educational quality, and foster holistic development and lifelong learning among children across diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

10. Conclusion:-

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) during the foundational stage plays a vital role in nurturing the all-round development of children, encompassing their cognitive, emotional, social, and moral dimensions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscores this phase as the cornerstone of lifelong learning and calls for a comprehensive transformation in teacher education. It envisions preparing educators who can effectively employ child-centered, inclusive, play-oriented, and contextually relevant teaching methods to support holistic learning. The findings of this study indicate that although initiatives such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Samagra Shiksha have advanced the cause of early education, significant gaps persist in ensuring equitable quality and teacher readiness. Teacher education programs often require deeper integration of experiential learning, developmental psychology, and inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Drawing insights from globally recognized models such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and High Scope, India can strengthen its approach to ECCE by fostering creativity, inquiry, empathy, and collaboration among young learners. Reforming teacher education in accordance with NEP 2020 is crucial to building a strong and equitable ECCE ecosystem. A dynamic curriculum, ongoing professional learning opportunities, and institutional support systems are essential to empower teachers and elevate the quality of foundational education. By aligning policy intent with effective practice, India can lay the groundwork for nurturing confident, compassionate,



and intellectually vibrant citizens, ensuring that every child receives a meaningful and equitable start in life.

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