

Aligning Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory with India's National Education Policy 2020 for Holistic Student Development

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ABSTRACT

India's National Education Policy 2020 visualizes a wider, more flexible, and more individually focussed education than exists today. The focus in Indian classrooms is primarily on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. However, by adopting Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, the provisions of NEP 2020 can be examined to determine how they can contribute to holistic development. A conceptual analysis of the policy in this paper elucidates the provisions linked to mother tongue, competency-based education, vocational education, arts education, social and emotional learning, and assessment. The challenges to implementing these provisions are also discussed. The article concludes that MI theory is not a substitute but a helpful framework for translating NEP 2020's broad aims into classroom practice for more inclusive, learner-centred schooling in India.

Keywords: Multiple Intelligences, NEP 2020, holistic education, assessment, curriculum reform

Introduction

The concept of intelligence and how schools should respond to this have been present in the thoughts of educators for over a century. For most of the last century, the understanding of intelligence was narrow. The abilities that were considered to be the most important in schools were similar to those tested in IQ tests. Other methods of intelligence or strength in individuals were ignored by most school systems. Those who excelled in areas beyond those tested on in IQ tests were often ignored by schools. In response to these concepts, however, many have argued that intelligence is actually more than can be captured by a single test of intelligence, and that using such a standard to evaluate students within schools leads to the misrepresentation of the intelligence of many students (Stanovich, 2009).



Howard Gardner proposed the Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) in the early 1980s as a means of explaining the many forms of intelligence in humans. Gardner proposed that there were at least eight forms of intelligence in humans, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences (Gardner, 1983). While the theory has developed over time to indicate that each of these intelligences can be developed through participating in the cultures that develop and utilize these forms of intelligence (Gardner & Connell, 2000), Gardner has also stated that the theory functions more as a guide for educators than as an understanding of the brains of humans (Gardner, 1993).

The educational value of MI theory is the reason for its survival despite the continued debates surrounding the theory in the field of psychology. While some researchers have suggested that the neuroscience studies of the brains of humans does not provide sufficient support for the theory of multiple intelligences, other studies have suggested that there is empirical support for the theory, both in neuroscience studies of the brains of humans and in studies that examine the applications of MI theory in educational settings (Shearer & Karanian, 2017; Aydin, 2019). Thus, the theory's survival in education is in part due to the fact that it allows for educators to understand that students have different strengths, and that the education system should account for these differences. While it may not be a theory that can be applied directly to classrooms, it is a theory that can be used as a framework for educators within the classrooms.

That is the context for understanding the policies that emerged in 2020: the NEP 2020. India's NEP 2020 proposes a shift away from a type of education that focuses mainly on rote learning, examinations, and narrow subjects towards an education that focuses on holistic development of individuals, flexibility in education, and competency in learned subjects and skills. While the policy does not reference Gardner or MI theory specifically in its creation, many of the provisions of the policy are similar to those that are proposed with MI theory. Thus, using the framework that MI theory provides for understanding intelligence, it is possible to understand the provisions within the NEP 2020.



NEP 2020 and the case for holistic schooling

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 responds to the limitations of the existing school model. For years, the focus of schooling in India has largely been on recall and performance in school board exams. NEP 2020 recognises that this approach has not helped students develop important skills like creativity, critical thinking, practical skills, or a sense of well-being (NEP, 2020). Therefore, the policy recommends a 5+3+3+4 structure for the school curriculum with a concentrate on early childhood learning, competency-based curricula, and active teaching methodologies (NEP, 2020).

One of the most important aspects of NEP 2020 is its stance on languages of instruction. The policy recommends using the home language, mother tongue, or local language of the students until at least grade 5 and preferably beyond (NEP, 2020). Not only is this a matter of equity and inclusion for students of specific regions of India, but it has been demonstrated that learning a language in which one is already proficient enhances understanding, confidence, and participation in classroom activities (Tsimpli et al., 2020). Furthermore, authors Singh and Kumar (2024) state that teachers must be prepared and utilize specific teaching methodologies to effectively teach in a multilingual classroom. This decision by the policymakers aligns with the theory of multiple intelligences in that a learner must be allowed to use the language that they are most familiar with and possess.

Furthermore, the policy expanded the definition of valuable knowledge. For example, vocational education beginning in the middle school stage demonstrates that manual and craft skills are an important part of education in addition to academic knowledge. Other aspects, such as the integration of the arts into the curriculum at all educational stages and the introduction of the PARAKH assessment system work in alignment with this decision to expand the definition of valuable knowledge. Thus, NEP 2020 goes beyond just suggesting new subjects and curricula for schools. It proposes a new idea of what is considered an educated person in the 21st century.

Why MI theory fits NEP 2020

The theory of multiple intelligences can be seen as aligning with the goals of the NEP 2020 despite not being exact in its alignment. While MI theory and NEP 2020 have different goals overall, there are similarities in the two that demonstrate the way in which the NEP 2020 does consider the various types of intelligences that exist within students and strives to enable them to reach their full potential.



Intelligence in the realm of language aligns with the importance of learning students' mother tongues. These language skills will allow for students to learn in a way that is comfortable for the student and to allow the student to develop a confidence in their knowledge of the concepts. Additionally, research in the area of multilingual skills indicates that these can lead to benefits in other cognitive skills beyond language alone (Tsimplici et al., 2020). By incorporating these skills into the education system in India, the theory of multiple intelligences allows for the recognition of these language skills within students.

The inclusion of competency-based learning in the NEP 2020 aligns with the logical-mathematical intelligence within MI theory. This type of learning allows for the students to utilize their logical and mathematical minds to perform activities within the curriculum that focus on these areas of knowledge. While this form of learning is valued by the NEP 2020, the theory of multiple intelligences indicates that this is only one of many intelligences that should be valued in students (Bhardwaj et al., 2024).

The spatial intelligence of students can be developed within subjects like science, mathematics, geography, and the design of various projects. Studies in the relationship between spatial and mathematical intelligence show a strong correlation between these two types of intelligence (Hawes et al., 2020). The use of project-based and experiential learning allows for these spatial intelligences to be recognized in students.

The bodily-kinesthetic intelligence within MI theory relates to the value of vocational and experiential education within the NEP 2020. For too long in India, education within vocational schools focused on skills that were considered below those within academic education (Hyland, 2018). By shifting away from this type of education, NEP 2020 allows for the recognition of skills that develop outside of academic education.

Similarly, the musical and artistic intelligences within the theory of multiple intelligences can be developed with the inclusion of music and art education within the NEP 2020. As Gardner (1993) explains, musical intelligence is one of the critical intelligences within the theory. The continued omission of music and art education from the Indian education system sends a message to students of these intelligences within themselves. By allowing for music and art to be incorporated into the



education system under NEP 2020, it sends a counter-message to students of the importance of these intelligences.

Intelligence within the area of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills can be developed through the focus of the NEP 2020 on the values and well-being of students. These intelligences require students to interact and work well with others and to manage their own emotions and behaviors. By allowing these intelligences to be recognized by the NEP 2020, as well as by including activities that encourage their development, the education system will better enable these skills in students.

Naturalist intelligence can be developed through environmental education and the focus on experiential learning within the NEP 2020. Both require students to interact with the natural world and to observe their effects on the environment. Studies in the effects of outdoor learning indicate benefits to students' learning and their development (Mann et al., 2022). Thus, allowing for naturalist intelligence to be developed within students is consistent with NEP 2020.

An additional way in which the theory of multiple intelligences can be used is to avoid misusing the theory to label different types of students within a school. MI theory does not intend for students to be labeled as having specific intelligences over others. While a student may have spatial intelligences in science but interpersonal intelligences in interacting with others, each can be developed. Additionally, the intelligence within a student can change with time, education, and opportunities (NEP, 2020; Gardner & Connell, 2000). Thus, using the theory to explain the focus of the NEP 2020 on identifying and developing the intelligences and talents of each student allows for a better understanding of the theory.

Finally, MI theory also prevents the overreach of a psychometric theory while still valuing the academic abilities of students. While NEP 2020 aims to develop intelligences beyond those that are academic, such as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences as well as naturalist intelligence, it does not suggest the neglecting of academic skills. Furthermore, it is important to consider that India is a country with concerns regarding the quality of its education system. Thus, by using MI theory to indicate that various types of intelligences should be developed within students, it does not deny the value of academic education but rather extends its appreciation to other forms of intelligence within students.

Similarly, NEP 2020 also suggests an alternative form of assessing students of different intelligences. Rather than requiring students to complete the same tests of knowledge, different forms of understanding of the content can be developed for individuals of different intelligences. For example, spatially intelligent students may better learn content through visual projects, while others may better learn content through reading or presenting to others. This alternative form of assessing understanding ensures that each student is able to exhibit the knowledge of the concepts within the NEP 2020 in a way that is compatible with their intelligences.

Implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment

The most practical implication of this alignment is that the curriculum can offer different ways of learning the same concept. A lesson on the concept of energy could involve reading, discussion, problem-solving activities, visual diagrams, physical demonstrations of the concept, group activities, and journaling assignments. While it is true that every topic in the curriculum could have eight different lessons dedicated to it, this is not the idea. Instead, each lesson should work in a way that multiple intelligences can be engaged within each learner. Gardner (1993) described this idea as educational responsiveness to the learner profiles of each student. This idea is at the center of the NEP 2020.

Therefore, the pedagogy within these classrooms must become more differentiated to accommodate for the different intelligences within each student. Teachers must find ways to understand the intelligences of their students without labelling their learners as possessing specific intelligences. Aydin (2019) conducted several research studies that demonstrated the positive effect of incorporating MI theory into the classroom. Furthermore, Hanafin (2014) also found that using action research based on the MI theory successfully changed the teaching practices of teachers within the classroom. These findings suggest that the MI theory is most effective when used as a planning tool for teachers rather than a means of categorizing their learners.

For assessment, most of the benefits of MI theory and the NEP 2020 policy will go unseen if only written tests are used in schools. Other forms of assessment that would better allow for the observation of the MI theory include using portfolios, project work, observation, and presentation assignments. Gardner (1993) suggested that assessments should account for the various intelligences of the



students. While not directly related to the NEP 2020 policy, the PARAKH framework also suggests alternatives to examinations and encourages the formation of holistic assessments. Thus, while examinations will still be a part of the education system, they will no longer be the only form of assessment.

Challenges to implementation

Though the theory is excellent, the implementation of this theory will pose challenges to the classroom. One of the first issues is the preparedness of the teachers. Many teachers have not been trained in how to teach for different intelligences. Even though the NEP 2020 policy will train teachers in the future, it will not help the teachers currently in the classroom who will need further training to implement this theory in their classrooms.

The second issue will be the infrastructure of the classroom. Teaching for different intelligences will require changes in the classroom that may not be able to be made in many classrooms. For instance, using music and movement activities will be challenging for classrooms of 50 students. Additionally, rural and government schools may not have the resources to facilitate these changes.

The third issue will be the assessment system for students. Many parents and schools in India still rely on marks as the sign of a student's successes. Therefore, the new assessment system will face challenges in being understood and implemented correctly.

However, the integration of MI theory can help bridge the gap between policy and practice. It can allow teachers to envision what holistic development looks like in the classroom, but only if those in charge of the schools and teacher education see the value of this theory. The value of this theory does not lie in the classification of intelligences but in understanding that every student should have the opportunity to develop in various ways.

Conclusion

Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and India's NEP 2020 both hold the view that students are as diverse as the measures that are used to evaluate their performance in schools. While MI theory helps to name the different forms of intelligence that are ignored in current educational systems, the NEP 2020 provides a structure for these intelligences to be acknowledged in current schools. Thus,

both of these concepts can be aligned with one another to create a framework for discussing the topic of intelligences in the context of education in India.

The article does not attempt to state that MI theory is a theory that will resolve the debates regarding intelligence in education or that it is the only theory that can be applied to the NEP 2020 framework. However, it does state that MI theory can be used to discuss the concept of holistic education in Indian schools and the benefits that would result from the implementation of this theory into the education system in India.

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