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Rethinking School Mathematics for Meaningful Learning: A Conceptual Perspective on NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023

Prof. Bipan Uppal
Assistant Professor, Department of Mathematics, Mata Sahib Kaur Girls College, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author: *Prof. Bipan Uppal

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Abstract

Mathematics education in India is at an important point of transition. Recent educational reforms encourage schools to move beyond an approach in which success is identified mainly with remembering rules and reproducing standard procedures. This paper examines the implications of the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 for school mathematics. It develops a conceptual model called the Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle, linking encounter, exploration, representation, formalisation, extension, review and communication. The paper argues that procedural fluency remains important but becomes educationally stronger when supported by conceptual understanding, reasoning and application. The discussion considers foundational numeracy, classroom pedagogy, assessment, teacher preparation, technology, interdisciplinary connections and equitable participation. The study is based on qualitative analysis of policy and curriculum documents together with established mathematics education literature and does not report fabricated survey or experimental data. It concludes that meaningful reform depends primarily on changes in classroom tasks, teacher questioning and assessment practices. Mathematics becomes more powerful when learners are enabled not merely to obtain answers but to understand relationships, select methods and explain why conclusions make sense.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mathematics is frequently described as a universal language, but in school it is experienced in very different ways. For some learners, it is a connected system of ideas that helps them notice patterns and solve problems. For others, it appears as a sequence of rules that must be remembered before an examination. The difference is not simply a matter of student ability. It is also shaped by the kinds of experiences that mathematics classrooms provide.

Traditional instruction has often given considerable attention to correct procedures. Students are shown a method, practise similar examples and are then expected to reproduce the method independently. This approach has practical advantages. Mathematics requires fluency, and students need repeated opportunities to become efficient. The limitation arises when the procedure becomes the entire lesson. A student may substitute numbers into a formula while remaining uncertain about the quantities involved. Another may solve a familiar equation but be unable to recognise the same relationship when it is presented in a table, graph or everyday situation.

Educational reform in India creates an opportunity to reconsider this pattern. The National Education Policy 2020 places emphasis on foundational learning, conceptual understanding, critical thinking, flexibility, experiential learning and reduced dependence on rote memorisation. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 provides a contemporary framework for translating broad educational aims into curriculum and classroom practice. These documents do not suggest that mathematical knowledge or formal methods should be abandoned. Instead, their wider educational vision encourages a more balanced understanding of successful learning.

The present paper develops this argument through the idea of mathematical sense-making. Sense-making refers to the learner's effort to understand what a mathematical situation means, how quantities or objects are related, which representation is useful and whether a conclusion is reasonable. The purpose is to examine how the reform context can support a shift from procedure-first teaching towards richer mathematical learning. The Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle proposed here is an interpretive framework, not an official government model.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper has four related objectives. First, it examines the educational implications of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 for the teaching and learning of school mathematics. Second, it explores the relationship among conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, reasoning and application, with particular attention to mathematical sense-making. Third, it proposes a classroom-oriented Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle that teachers may adapt across topics and grade levels. Finally, it discusses practical implications for assessment, teacher development, technology, interdisciplinary learning and equitable participation in mathematics classrooms.

3. Research Method and Scope

The study follows a qualitative, conceptual and document-based approach. NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 were treated as the principal policy and curriculum texts. Their educational priorities were examined for ideas relevant to mathematics learning, including foundational competence, conceptual understanding, critical thinking, experiential learning, flexibility, competency and assessment reform. Selected literature on mathematical proficiency, problem solving and modelling was also used to clarify these ideas.

The analysis was interpretive rather than statistical. The aim was not to measure the achievement of a particular group of students or to claim the effect of a classroom intervention. Accordingly, no survey percentages, experimental results or invented observations are presented. The proposed framework emerged from synthesising recurring ideas across the policy context and mathematics education literature.

The scope of the paper is school mathematics. The discussion is relevant to primary and secondary education, although exact strategies will vary according to age, topic and local conditions. The paper should therefore be read as a conceptual contribution and a practical framework for discussion rather than evidence of a tested intervention.

4. Why Mathematical Sense-Making Matters

Sense-making is central to the difference between knowing a mathematical rule and understanding a mathematical relationship. Consider a percentage problem. A learner may remember how to multiply by a percentage but still be confused about what the percentage refers to. Similarly, a learner may draw a graph without understanding the relationship between the axes and the quantities represented. In both cases, the visible procedure may hide incomplete understanding.

Mathematical sense-making involves several connected actions. Learners interpret information, identify relationships, select useful representations, carry out operations and examine whether the final result is sensible. These actions are not always performed in a fixed order. During problem solving, a student may return to an earlier representation, revise an assumption or compare two methods.

This perspective avoids a false opposition between understanding and fluency. Efficient procedures are valuable, but procedures become more secure when learners know what they represent and when they apply. The educational goal is informed fluency: students should work accurately while retaining awareness of underlying structure. Along with asking "What is the answer?", teachers can ask "What does this number represent?", "Can you show it another way?", "Why does this method work?" and "How can we check the result?" Such questions make mathematical thinking visible.

5. Foundational Learning and Number Sense

The reform agenda gives special importance to foundational learning, and mathematics provides one of the clearest examples of why foundations matter. Later difficulties are often connected with earlier gaps in number sense, place value, operations, fractions, measurement or comparison. When these ideas are weak, students may memorise later procedures without the conceptual base needed to interpret them.

Number sense is broader than rapid calculation. It includes awareness of magnitude, estimation, relationships among numbers and flexible ways of representing quantity. A learner who understands that one half can be represented as a fraction, a decimal, a percentage and a point on a number line has developed connections that support later learning.

Classroom work should combine concrete experiences, drawings, oral language and formal symbols. Manipulatives are useful when they help learners notice relationships rather than merely perform an activity. Number lines can support understanding of order and magnitude; arrays can illuminate multiplication; measurement tasks can connect units with real quantities.

Foundational support should not disappear after the early years. Older learners may also need opportunities to revisit ideas that were never fully understood. Such support should be integrated respectfully into regular teaching rather than treated as evidence that a student is incapable of higher-level mathematics.

6. From Exploration to Formal Mathematics

One practical challenge for teachers is deciding how to connect exploration with formal instruction. Exploration alone may remain informal, while direct presentation alone may leave students dependent on imitation. A productive lesson can move between the two.

Before presenting a general relationship for area, students can examine coverings, rectangular arrays or decomposed shapes. They may record observations and compare cases. The teacher can then guide attention towards common structure and introduce a concise mathematical formulation. Formalisation becomes the result of organised thinking rather than an isolated command to memorise.

Algebra offers similar opportunities. A changing situation may first be described verbally, then organised in a table and represented graphically before being expressed as an equation. Each representation reveals something about the same relationship. Students can therefore learn that an equation is not simply a string of symbols but one way of expressing structure.

The aim is not to insist that every topic begin with a real-world activity. Mathematics itself contains rich patterns and questions. The important point is that learners should encounter opportunities to build meaning before, during or after formal procedures, depending on the nature of the concept.

7. Reasoning as a Regular Classroom Practice

Reasoning develops when students are expected to give grounds for mathematical statements. In a reasoning-oriented classroom, an answer is often followed by a question about how the answer was obtained or why the method is valid. This does not require every response to become a formal proof. Reasoning can begin with explanation, comparison and the search for patterns.

Students can compare two methods for the same problem and discuss which method is more efficient under particular conditions. They can predict what will happen when a quantity changes, test the prediction and revise their thinking. They can search for examples that support a claim and examples that challenge it.

Errors can also become useful learning resources. If a common incorrect method appears, the teacher can invite students to locate the step at which the reasoning changed. The purpose is not to embarrass the student but to examine the mathematical assumption involved. This reduces the tendency to see mathematics as a subject in which only the final answer matters.

A sustained culture of reasoning improves communication as well. Students learn to use mathematical language, diagrams and examples to make their ideas understandable to others. Such habits are valuable across topics and support the broader educational emphasis on critical thinking.

8. Application and Modelling: Using Mathematics with Purpose

Mathematics gains additional meaning when students encounter situations in which mathematical reasoning is genuinely useful. Applications may involve data, measurement, financial decisions, environmental questions, travel, design or scientific investigations. The context itself is not sufficient; students should identify quantities, relationships and assumptions.

Mathematical modelling provides a useful way to organise this process. Learners begin with a situation and decide which features are mathematically important. They simplify where necessary, choose variables or representations, carry out calculations and interpret results in relation to the original situation. They may then reconsider whether assumptions were reasonable.

For example, students investigating water use in a school can work with estimation, unit conversion, tabulation, graphical representation and comparison. The important questions are not limited to obtaining a total. Students can discuss which measurements are reliable, what assumptions are being made and how different estimates influence conclusions.

Recognising limitations is part of mathematical maturity. A model is useful because it simplifies reality, but that simplification should be examined rather than ignored.

9. The Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle

The analysis in this paper leads to a six-part instructional model called the Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle. It is intended as a flexible guide rather than a mandatory sequence.

The first element is Encounter. Learners meet a mathematical question, pattern, situation or relationship. The starting point may be an everyday context, a visual pattern, a puzzle or an internal mathematical problem.

The second element is Explore. Students examine examples, try approaches, manipulate representations or discuss prior ideas. The teacher observes how students interpret the task.

The third element is Represent. Learners express thinking through diagrams, tables, graphs, words, symbols or physical models. Movement between representations is encouraged when it clarifies relationships.

The fourth element is Formalise. Definitions, notation, procedures or general statements are made precise. The teacher connects informal insights with accepted mathematical language.

The fifth element is Extend. Students use the idea in additional examples, unfamiliar questions or connected topics. They practise procedures while considering when and why those procedures apply.

The sixth element is Review and Communicate. Learners explain conclusions, check the reasonableness of results and reflect on what has been learned. The cycle is deliberately simple: a mathematics lesson can include both discovery and precision, both practice and explanation.

10. Rethinking Assessment

Assessment is one of the strongest influences on classroom practice. If students are assessed almost entirely through routine questions, teaching is likely to focus on repeated rehearsal. A broader view of mathematics learning therefore requires broader evidence.

Teachers can include tasks that ask students to interpret information, select a method, explain a step, compare two answers or identify an error. A question may have a short final answer but still require students to show reasoning. Such tasks provide information about misconceptions that a multiple-choice response may not reveal.

Formative assessment is especially important for sense-making. During a lesson, teachers can listen to explanations, examine diagrams and ask follow-up questions. This allows misconceptions to be addressed while learning is taking place.

Assessment reform does not mean abandoning practice tests or objective questions. Different formats serve different purposes. The key is balance. A useful assessment system should provide evidence of accuracy, conceptual understanding, reasoning and application rather than treating one as the sole indicator of achievement.

11. Teacher Preparation and Professional Support

The proposed shift places new demands on mathematics teachers. Teachers need strong knowledge of content, but they also need to understand how students commonly learn and misunderstand that content. They must decide when exploration is useful, when direct explanation is necessary and how to connect informal reasoning with formal mathematics.

Professional development is most effective when connected with actual classroom work. Teachers can analyse student responses, discuss alternative representations, redesign routine questions and reflect on lesson results. Collaborative planning can help move from broad policy terminology to specific classroom decisions.

Teacher education should also address mathematical confidence. A teacher who understands only one procedure may find it difficult to respond when students propose different methods. Deeper content knowledge supports pedagogical flexibility.

Schools and teacher education programmes can support reform by creating time for discussion, lesson study and sharing resources. Sustainable change is unlikely to result from a single orientation programme.

12. Technology, Interdisciplinary Connections and Equity

Digital tools can enrich mathematical learning when used to investigate relationships. Spreadsheets can support data analysis, graphing software can connect equations with visual patterns and dynamic geometry tools can allow students to test conjectures. Technology should, however, be followed by questions that require interpretation. Seeing a graph on a screen is not the same as understanding the relationship it represents.

Interdisciplinary learning can provide meaningful settings for mathematics. Science investigations use measurement and data; geography uses scale and spatial information; economics uses ratios and trends; computing uses logic and algorithms. Strong interdisciplinary work should preserve the integrity of mathematics by ensuring that learners can identify the actual mathematical ideas being used.

Equity is equally important. Students differ in language, prior opportunities and confidence. Multiple representations can provide different entry points into a concept, while clear mathematical expectations can be maintained for all. A supportive classroom should treat mistakes as opportunities for revision and should avoid presenting mathematics as a talent possessed only by a limited group.

Access to technology also varies. Reform should therefore not depend entirely on expensive digital resources. Discussion, paper-based representations, locally available materials and thoughtful questioning remain powerful tools.

13. Challenges and Practical Recommendations

Several factors may limit implementation. Teachers often work under pressure to complete a prescribed syllabus, and examination patterns may continue to reward routine performance. Large classes can make it difficult to listen to every student's reasoning. Unequal resources and uneven professional preparation can create further variation.

A practical response is to begin with small changes rather than redesign every lesson at once. Teachers can add one reasoning question to a routine exercise set, ask students to compare two methods or include a short reflection at the end of a lesson. Over time, such practices can change classroom expectations.

Curriculum materials should include varied task types. Textbooks can provide opportunities for fluency, conceptual exploration, reasoning and application. Assessment bodies can gradually increase questions that require interpretation and justification. Teacher education institutions can focus on analysing actual tasks and student work.

Most importantly, different parts of the system need coherence. A policy that promotes conceptual learning will have limited classroom effect if textbooks, examinations and teacher support continue to communicate that only memorised procedures matter.

14. CONCLUSION

The current educational reform context offers an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of school mathematics. Mathematics should continue to develop accuracy and fluency, but these goals need to be connected with understanding, reasoning and meaningful use. The central argument of this paper is that mathematical learning becomes more durable when students are supported in making sense of relationships rather than simply reproducing methods.

The Mathematical Sense-Making Cycle provides one possible way to translate this idea into classroom practice. Through encounter, exploration, representation, formalisation, extension, review and communication, learners can move between intuitive ideas and formal mathematics. The sequence is flexible, but the underlying principle is consistent: procedures should be connected to meaning.

The success of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 in mathematics classrooms will depend on everyday practices. Teacher questions, student tasks, representations and assessment methods will determine whether reform becomes visible to learners. A meaningful transformation therefore requires sustained teacher support and greater alignment between curriculum intentions and assessment.

Ultimately, the goal is not to make mathematics easier by reducing intellectual demands. The goal is to make mathematical demands more intelligible. Students should be challenged to think carefully, but they should also be given opportunities to understand what they are thinking about and why a method works. Such an approach can help develop learners who are capable not only of solving familiar questions but also of approaching new mathematical situations with confidence and judgement.

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