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Bridging the Early Learning Gap: Implementation Strategies and Barriers Under NEP 2020

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Abstract

This case study critically examines the vision, implementation strategies, and challenges of early childhood care and education (ECCE) reforms under India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. We analyse how the NEP 2020 redefines ECCE by introducing a unified Foundational Stage for children aged 3–8 years, emphasising play-based pedagogy, teacher training, and parental involvement, thereby addressing historical gaps in early learning. Through qualitative, document-based analysis of policy frameworks and secondary literature, the study identifies key mechanisms for implementation, including alignment with global best practices such as developmentally appropriate pedagogy (DAP) and foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). Moreover, the research highlights the policy's commitment to equity through universal access initiatives, which could significantly improve early learning outcomes if effectively executed. However, systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained educators, and coordination gaps among stakeholders pose substantial barriers to successful implementation. The findings suggest that regional disparities in resource allocation and monitoring may further exacerbate these challenges, potentially limiting the policy's impact. Nevertheless, this study underscores the transformative potential of NEP 2020's ECCE reforms, provided that sustained investment and rigorous evaluation mechanisms are prioritised. This research contributes to the broader discourse on early childhood education by offering a nuanced evaluation of policy-driven systemic change, with implications for policymakers and practitioners aiming to increase equitable access and quality in ECCE.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian education system has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, shaped by historical, socioeconomic, and policy-driven factors. While the system has made strides in expanding access to primary and higher education, gaps persist in early childhood care and education (ECCE), a critical phase for cognitive and socioemotional development (Cheney et al., 2005). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark shift in addressing these gaps, with an emphasis on foundational learning and holistic development for children aged 3–8 years. This policy aligns with global best practices, such as developmentally appropriate pedagogy (DAP) and foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), while also drawing from India's ancient educational traditions (Mishra & Aithal, 2023). However, the implementation of such ambitious reforms faces systemic challenges, including infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and regional disparities (Kapur, 2018).

The significance of this study lies in its critical evaluation of NEP 2020's ECCE reforms, which aim to bridge historical inequities in early learning. By integrating play-based pedagogy, parental involvement, and teacher training, the policy seeks to create a more inclusive and effective early education framework. Nevertheless, the success of these reforms hinges on overcoming entrenched barriers, such as inadequate funding and fragmented governance (Hill & Chalaux, 2011). This research contributes to the discourse by providing a nuanced analysis of the policy's vision, implementation mechanisms, and potential pitfalls, offering insights for policymakers and practitioners.

The study addresses three key research questions: (1) How does the NEP 2020 redefine ECCE within the Indian education system? (2) What mechanisms are proposed for its implementation? (3) What challenges may hinder its success? These questions are explored through a qualitative, document-based analysis of the NEP 2020 and secondary literature, with a focus on policy alignment with global standards and ground-level realities. The findings reveal both the transformative potential of the policy and the systemic obstacles that could undermine its impact.

The objective of this research is to assess the feasibility and implications of NEP 2020's ECCE reforms, particularly in terms of equity, quality, and scalability. By examining the policy's theoretical underpinnings and practical challenges, this study aims to inform future strategies for effective implementation. This is particularly relevant in light of India's diverse socioeconomic landscape, where regional disparities often exacerbate educational inequalities (Gupta & Dubey, 2019).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on ECCE and policy reforms in India, highlighting gaps and opportunities. Section 3 describes the case study methodology and data sources. Section 4 presents the findings, discussing the policy's alignment with global practices and the challenges of implementation. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on the broader implications of the NEP 2020 for early childhood education in India.

NEP 2020 Foundational Stage Restructuring Data (Tables 1 & 2)

Table 1: Pre-NEP 2020 Structure (10+2)
This structure largely ignored the 3- 6 age group, focusing mainly on the compulsory school years (aged 6 or older).

Stage/Component	Age Range	Grade/Class	Focus
No Formal ECCE	3 - 6	Pre-Primary/Anganwadi (Disjointed)	Health, Nutrition (Welfare)
Primary	6 - 16	Class 1 to 10	General Education (Rote Focus)
Secondary	16 - 18	Class 11 to 12	Subject Specialisation (Boards)

Table 2*:* NEP 2020 structure (5+3+3+4)
This unified structure integrates ECCE and redesigns the entire school experience based on the cognitive development of the child.

Stage/Component	Age Range	Grade/Class	Pedagogy/Focus
1. FOUNDATIONAL STAGE (5 Years)	3 - 8	Preschool (3 years) + Grade 1 & 2 (2 years)	Play-based, Activity-based learning, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)
2. PREPARATORY STAGE (3 Years)	8 - 11	Grade 3, 4, 5	Interactive classroom learning, discovery, and introduction to subjects.
3. MIDDLE STAGE (3 Years)	11 - 14	Grade 6, 7, 8	Subject teachers for specific subjects (Science, Arts, Humanities), and an introduction to vocational training.
4. SECONDARY STAGE (4 Years)	14 - 18	Grade 9, 10, 11, 12	Multidisciplinary study, flexibility, choice of subjects, and critical thinking.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on early childhood care and education (ECCE) has evolved significantly, with increasing recognition of its foundational role in cognitive and socioemotional development. Globally, frameworks such as developmentally appropriate pedagogy (DAP) emphasise the importance of play-based learning and holistic development for young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marked a paradigm shift by integrating these principles into its foundational stage (ages 3–8), aligning with international benchmarks while addressing local contextual needs (Ministry of Education, 2020). Historically, ECCE in India has been fragmented, with disparities in access and quality across regions and socioeconomic groups. Studies highlight how inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained educators, and

a lack of standardised curricula have hindered equitable early learning opportunities (Rao et al., 2021). The NEP 2020 attempts to address these gaps by proposing a unified framework that bridges anganwadis (rural childcare centres) and formal preschools, ensuring continuity in early education (Kapil, 2002). This approach resonates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of structured environments and social interactions in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). The policy's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) reflects evidence from longitudinal studies demonstrating that early proficiency in these domains predicts long-term academic success (Heckman, 2011). However, critics argue that an overemphasis on FLNs risks overshadowing the broader goals of ECCE, such as creativity and socioemotional skills (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009). NEP 2020 navigates this tension by advocating for a balanced pedagogy that integrates play, storytelling, and arts—a model inspired by Piaget's constructivist theories (Piaget, 1952). Implementation challenges remain a critical concern. While NEP 2020 outlines ambitious strategies for teacher training and parental engagement, systemic barriers such as funding shortages and bureaucratic inertia persist (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). Comparative studies of similar reforms in other countries suggest that sustained investment and decentralised governance are key to success (van den Heuvel et al., 2013). For example, the Anganwadi system's integration with formal education requires robust coordination between the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Education—a complex task given India's federal structure (Panchamukhi, 2013).

The literature also highlights the role of community participation in ECCE. NEP 2020's call for parental involvement aligns with research showing that family engagement enhances learning outcomes, particularly in marginalised communities (Honig, 1979). However, cultural and logistical barriers, such as parental literacy levels and economic constraints, may limit this aspect of the policy's impact (Paul et al., 2021). Existing studies on NEP 2020's ECCE reforms have focused largely on its theoretical merits, with limited empirical analysis of ground-level implementation (Malik & Hasan, 2024). This study fills that gap by critically examining the policy's operational challenges and regional disparities, drawing on document analysis and secondary data.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CASE DESCRIPTION

The present study adopts a qualitative, document-based approach to analyse the early childhood care and education (ECCE) reforms proposed under India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The primary case under examination is the policy framework itself, which serves as the foundational document for systemic changes in early childhood education. The analysis extends to secondary sources, including government reports, policy briefs, and peer-reviewed research articles that contextualise the policy's implementation within India's educational landscape (Ministry of Education, 2020). The NEP 2020 introduces a radical restructuring of early childhood education through its proposed Foundational Stage, which integrates children aged 3–8 years into a continuous learning phase. This stage combines preschool education (ages 3–6) with the first two years of primary school (grades 1–2), creating a unified pedagogical approach. The policy emphasises play-based learning methodologies, drawing from global best practices in developmentally appropriate pedagogies (DAPs) while incorporating indigenous knowledge systems (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The implementation framework outlined in the NEP 2020 involves multiple stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, state governments, and local communities. A key component is the integration of existing Anganwadi centres—India's rural childcare institutions—with formal school systems to ensure universal access to quality ECCE. The policy mandates the development of standardised learning materials, teacher training programs, and assessment tools specifically designed for the Foundational Stage (Kapil, 2002).

Table 3: Inter-Ministerial Coordination Framework for ECCE

Agency/Stakeholder	Primary Role in NEP 2020 ECCE	Key Deliverable/Responsibility	Implementation Challenge Highlighted
Ministry of Education (MoE)	Setting Curricular & Pedagogical Standards	Development of the National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework (NCPFECE) and teacher training modules.	Alignment of pedagogical practices (play-based vs. formal academics).
Ministry of WCD (MWCD)	Management of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)	Provision of infrastructure, health, nutrition services, and managing Anganwadi Worker (AWW) salaries.	Shifting AWC's focus from pure welfare to structured early learning.
State Governments/SCERTs	Decentralised Implementation & Monitoring	Local adaptation of curriculum, resource allocation, and scaling up of the Foundational Stage.	Disparities in fiscal capacity and regional resource allocation.
Local Bodies/Panchayats	Community mobilization & Ownership	Ensuring parental engagement, local monitoring of AWCs, and safety/upkeep of facilities.	Overcoming sociocultural barriers and low parental literacy levels.
Teacher Education Institutions	Capacity Building	Developing and delivering the Diploma in ECCE for Anganwadi Workers and primary teachers.	Addressing the shortage of qualified ECCE teacher trainers and the scale of the training need.

Teacher capacity building forms a critical pillar of the proposed reforms. NEP 2020 outlines comprehensive training programs for both Anganwadi workers and primary school teachers, focusing on child-centred pedagogies, multilingual education, and inclusive practices for children with disabilities. The policy also emphasises the role of parents and communities in early learning, advocating for awareness campaigns and participatory monitoring mechanisms (Honig, 1979).

The study examines the policy's operationalisation through state-level initiatives that serve as pilot cases for nationwide implementation. For example, the *NIPUN Bharat* mission launched in 2021 aims to achieve foundational literacy and

numeracy (FLN) by 2026–27, providing concrete examples of Behera, 2022). These implementation cases reveal the challenges of scaling up innovations across India's diverse educational contexts, from urban private schools to rural government institutions.

The case description also considers the historical context of ECCE in India, tracing the evolution from fragmented preschool systems to the integrated approach proposed by NEP 2020. This includes an examination of previous policies such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme and their limitations in addressing quality and equity gaps (Rao et al., 2021). The analysis highlights how NEP 2020 builds upon these legacy systems while introducing transformative elements such as the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure.

The infrastructure requirements form another critical dimension of the case study. NEP 2020 envisions child-friendly learning environments with adequate space, materials, and safety measures, but the policy documents acknowledge existing disparities in school facilities across states. The study examines these disparities through government data on school infrastructure, teacher–pupil ratios, and learning outcomes, providing a baseline for evaluating policy implementation challenges (Bandhopadhyay, 2009).

The case description concludes with an overview of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms proposed in NEP 2020, including the National Assessment Centre (PARAKH) and school-based assessments. These systems aim to track progress in foundational learning while maintaining flexibility for contextual adaptations—a balance that remains untested at scale (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). The study thus positions NEP 2020's ECCE reforms as ambitious yet complex cases of systemic change in diverse and resource-constrained environments.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the transformative vision of NEP 2020's ECCE reforms, their alignment with global best practices, and the systemic challenges that could impede their successful implementation. By analysing policy documents and secondary data, this research highlights both the potential and the complexities of translating this ambitious framework into tangible outcomes. The following discussion explores these dimensions in detail, addressing the policy's theoretical strengths, practical hurdles, and implications for equitable early learning in India.

4.1 Policy Vision and Framework for ECCE

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's approach to early childhood care and education (ECCE) by introducing a unified foundational stage for children aged 3–8 years. This structural integration bridges preschool education (ages 3–6) and early grades (classes 1–2), addressing the historical fragmentation between care and learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy's vision is rooted in neurobiological evidence that underscores the criticality of early brain development, positioning ECCE as the cornerstone of lifelong learning rather than mere preparatory schooling (Mustard, 2002).

how NEP 2020's vision translates into practice (Kumar & Central to this framework is the emphasis on play-based and experiential pedagogies, marking a departure from rote-learning traditions. The policy explicitly advocates for activity-based curricula that align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasising scaffolded learning through social interactions and guided play (Vygotsky, 1978). Such methodologies are operationalised through proposed classroom practices such as storytelling, arts integration, and exploratory games—approaches validated by global research on developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The policy framework also introduces systemic innovations to ensure equity and inclusion. Universal access provisions target disadvantaged groups through Anganwadi–school integration, aiming to mitigate socioeconomic disparities in early learning opportunities (Kapil, 2002). Notably, the policy mandates multilingual education in home or local languages during the Foundational Stage, addressing India's linguistic diversity while aligning with UNESCO's recommendations for mother tongue-based instruction (Singh, 2025). This linguistic inclusivity is coupled with special provisions for children with disabilities, reflecting the principles of universal learning design (Lohmann et al., 2018).

Teacher professionalisation forms another pillar of the vision, with proposed diploma programs in ECCE and continuous professional development for Anganwadi workers. The policy recognises that pedagogical shifts require sustained capacity building, drawing from Singapore's successful model of rigorous early childhood teacher training (Kosnik et al., 2016). However, the framework remains aspirational regarding implementation specifics, such as the duration of training or mechanisms for quality assurance—a gap that could undermine its transformative potential (Aithal & Aithal, 2019).

Parental engagement is reconceptualised as a shared responsibility rather than supplementary support. The policy mandates community awareness programs and parenting education modules, acknowledging Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which positions families as central to child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, the feasibility of such engagement in low-literacy contexts remains underexamined, particularly given India's heterogeneous sociocultural landscape (Paul et al., 2021).

The 5+3+3+4 curricular structure institutionalises the Foundational Stage within the broader education system, ensuring continuity between early and later learning phases. This structural reform is complemented by proposed assessment reforms that prioritise observational and portfolio-based evaluations over standardised testing—an approach aligned with contemporary early childhood assessment frameworks (Brenckman, 1999). However, the policy lacks clarity on how these assessments inform pedagogical adjustments or systemic accountability, raising questions about their practical utility (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

Financing mechanisms reveal both ambition and ambiguity. While the NEP 2020 advocates increasing public education expenditure to 6% of GDP, it does not specify allocation

percentages for ECCE—a critical omission given the sector's historical underfunding (Mehrotra, 2012). The policy's reliance on public–private partnerships for infrastructure development also warrants scrutiny, as evidence from other sectors suggests that such models often exacerbate inequities in resource distribution (Popova, 2022).

The vision's strength lies in its holistic conceptualisation of ECCE as encompassing health, nutrition, and psychosocial development alongside cognitive growth. This aligns with the WHO–UNICEF–Lancet model of nurturing care, positioning India's policy at the forefront of global ECCE discourse (World Health Organisation & UNICEF, 2018). However, the absence of a clear roadmap for intersectoral coordination between education, health, and women and child development ministries poses significant implementation risks (Bilodeau et al., 2018).

By redefining ECCE as a constitutional right rather than a welfare service, the NEP 2020 elevates its policy status—a move that could enhance accountability if backed by legal safeguards. This rights-based approach mirrors progressive frameworks such as Kenya's competency-based curriculum, although India's federal governance structure adds layers of complexity to its execution (van den Heuvel et al., 2013). The policy's success will ultimately hinge on translating this visionary framework into contextually adaptable practices that address India's vast regional disparities in educational access and quality (Gupta & Dubey, 2019).

4.2 Alignment with Global Research and Best Practices

The findings demonstrate that NEP 2020's ECCE framework strongly aligns with established global research on early childhood development. The policy's emphasis on play-based learning resonates with Piaget's constructivist theories, which posit that children construct knowledge through active exploration and social interaction (Piaget, 1952). This approach is further supported by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development concept, which informs the policy's scaffolding strategies through teacher-guided play activities (Vygotsky, 1978). These pedagogical foundations reflect the contemporary understanding that early learning occurs most effectively in environments that balance child-initiated exploration with intentional adult facilitation (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The policy's focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) aligns with longitudinal evidence demonstrating the economic and social returns of early competency in these domains. Heckman's Nobel Prize–winning research on skill formation underscores how high-quality early education reduces inequality by enhancing the cognitive and noncognitive skills that persist into adulthood (Heckman, 2011).

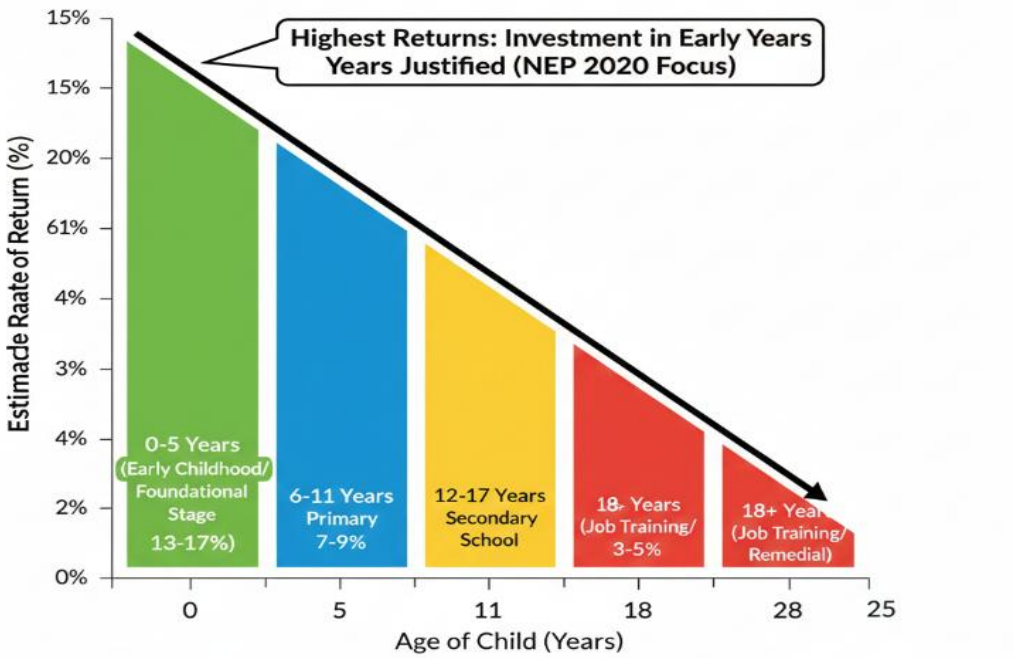

Figure 1: Economic Return on Investment in Human Capital by Age

NEP 2020's FLN targets mirror successful initiatives such as Kenya's *Tusome* program and Brazil's *Literacy at the Right Age* policy, which achieved measurable gains through structured pedagogical interventions in early grades (van den Heuvel et al., 2013). However, Indian policy distinguishes itself by integrating FLNs within a broader play-based framework rather than adopting narrow skill-drill approaches that have shown limited sustainability in other contexts (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009). Neurobiological research provides robust support for the policy's age grouping (3–8 years) as encompassing critical periods for synaptic formation and executive function development. The integration of preschool

and early primary education reflects the understanding that brain architecture develops rapidly during these years, with profound implications for later learning capacity (Mustard, 2002). This neurodevelopmental perspective informs the policy's stress-free assessment methods, as high-pressure testing during sensitive periods can induce toxic stress that impairs cognitive function (Gunnar & Barr, 1998).

The policy's multilingual approach draws from UNESCO's evidence on mother tongue–based instruction, which shows cognitive and academic advantages for children taught in their home language during early years (Singh, 2025). This aligns with successful bilingual models in countries such as Finland and Canada while adapting them to India's complex linguistic landscape. The emphasis on oral language development before formal literacy instruction reflects research on the primacy of phonological awareness as a predictor of reading success (Durgunoglu & Verhoeven, 2013).

Inclusive education strategies in the NEP 2020 mirror global best practices from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, which accommodates diverse learning needs without segregation (Lohmann et al., 2018). The policy's focus on screening and early intervention parallels successful models such as Jamaica's *Reach Up* program, which demonstrated the long-term benefits of identifying and supporting developmental delays during preschool years (Rao et al., 2017).

The whole-child development perspective embedded in NEP 2020 reflects the WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Nurturing Care Framework, which emphasises interconnected health, nutrition, safety, and responsive care components alongside education (World Health Organisation & UNICEF, 2018). This comprehensive view aligns with contemporary understanding that early development domains are interdependent, requiring integrated service delivery models (Bilodeau et al., 2018). The policy's attention to socioemotional learning similarly mirrors global trends, recognising these skills as foundational for academic achievement and life success (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

However, successful implementation requires addressing significant gaps between policy aspirations and ground realities. While the framework draws from global evidence, its effectiveness will depend on adapting these principles to India's diverse contexts—from urban private schools to rural Anganwadis. The policy's ambitious teacher training targets must contend with research showing that one-time workshops rarely change classroom practices without ongoing coaching and support (Zaslow et al., 2010). Similarly, the proposed parental engagement strategies must navigate complex barriers, including low literacy levels, economic constraints, and cultural beliefs about early learning (Paul et al., 2021).

The policy's assessment framework aligns with contemporary movements toward authentic, observation-based evaluation that captures developmental progress without high-stakes testing (Brenckman, 1999). However, global experience suggests that such systems require intensive teacher training and standardised tools to ensure reliability—challenges that India's scaled-up implementation will need to address (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). The absence of detailed protocols for transitioning play-based preschool pedagogies into more structured primary grades also represents an area requiring further alignment with international best practices on curricular continuity (Dunlop, 2018).

4.3 Implementation challenges

Despite the progressive vision outlined in the NEP 2020, the implementation of early childhood care and education (ECCE) reforms faces substantial systemic barriers that threaten their potential impact. Foremost among these is the critical shortage of trained educators equipped to deliver play-based, developmentally appropriate pedagogies. Current estimates suggest that India faces a deficit of over one million trained ECCE professionals, with existing Anganwadi workers often lacking formal qualifications in early childhood education (Datta & Kingdon, 2021). This gap is exacerbated by inadequate training infrastructure, as proposed diploma programs in ECCE remain underdeveloped and largely inaccessible to rural practitioners, who form the backbone of service delivery (Rajput & Walia, 2001).

Physical infrastructure presents another formidable challenge, particularly in government schools and Anganwadi centres that serve marginalised communities. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of Anganwadis lack dedicated learning spaces and basic sanitation facilities—conditions fundamentally incompatible with the policy's vision of stimulating and child-friendly learning environments (Debata et al., 2016). The integration of preschool and primary grades under the Foundational Stage requires substantial physical modifications to existing classrooms, including child-appropriate furniture, play areas, and learning materials that are largely absent in resource-constrained settings (Bandhopadhyay, 2009).

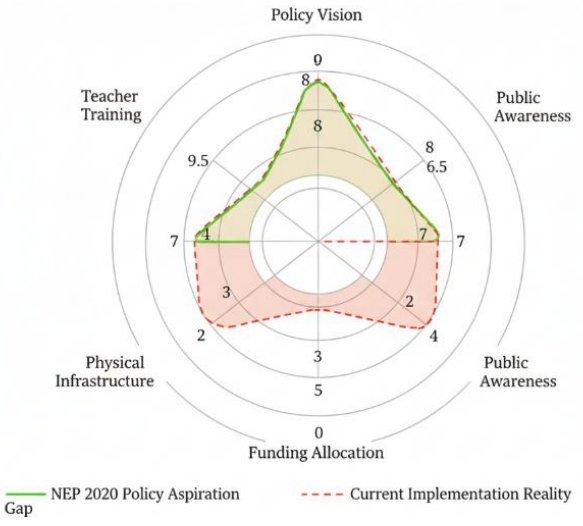

Figure 2: Gap analysis of implementation readiness

Coordination gaps between multiple implementing agencies create bureaucratic inertia that could derail the ambitious

integration goals of the policy. The convergence required between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and state education departments represents a complex governance challenge, given historical silos in program administration and funding streams (Debata et al., 2016). For example, Anganwadis currently operate under the ICDS framework focused on nutrition and health, whereas schools follow academic curricula—a dichotomy that demands unprecedented interministerial collaboration to align objectives and monitoring systems (Bandhopadhyay, 2009).

Financial constraints compound these structural challenges, with the policy's vision outpacing current budget allocations. While NEP 2020 advocates increasing education spending to 6% of GDP, it does not specify the proportion dedicated to ECCE—a critical omission given that early childhood historically received less than 1% of total education expenditure (Raina, 2021). The absence of clear financing mechanisms for infrastructure upgrades, teacher training, and learning materials raises concerns about equitable implementation across states with varying fiscal capacities (Sinha, 2017).

Monitoring and evaluation systems face capacity limitations that could obscure implementation gaps. The policy proposes school-based assessments and national-level surveys to track foundational learning outcomes, but existing data systems struggle with reliability issues, particularly in capturing play-based learning progress (Pathak, 2020). Without robust measurement tools adapted to India's linguistic and regional diversity, the policy risks either superficial compliance or inappropriate standardisation, undermining its contextual responsiveness (Verma & Choudhury, 2018).

Sociocultural barriers further complicate implementation, particularly regarding parental expectations and community participation. Deep-rooted perceptions of early education as formal academic preparation rather than holistic development create resistance to play-based approaches, especially in aspirational communities that view English-medium instruction as an upward mobility pathway (Sharma, 2019). The policy's emphasis on mother tongue instruction similarly encounters practical challenges in multilingual urban areas and tribal regions where language standardisation remains contentious (UNESCO, 2016). Regional disparities threaten to reproduce existing inequalities under the new framework. States with stronger education systems and fiscal capacity may implement reforms more effectively, whereas economically weaker states risk falling further behind—a pattern observed in previous national education initiatives (Aslam et al., 2018). The policy's decentralised approach, while theoretically allowing contextual adaptation, could inadvertently widen gaps if not accompanied by targeted support mechanisms for low-performing regions (Bhattacharya, 2020).

Temporal misalignments between policy timelines and ground realities pose additional risks. The ambitious 2025 target for universalising Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) appears unrealistic given current learning levels—with only 21% of Grade 3 students able to read Grade 2 text in 2022—and the time required for systemic changes to take root (Ministry of Education, 2021). Rushed implementation without adequate piloting and course correction could lead to superficial adoption of reforms rather than meaningful pedagogical transformation (Kumar, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic's legacy exacerbates these challenges, resulting in disrupted early learning for millions of children and depleted household resources available for education. Learning loss assessments show severe regression in foundational skills, requiring intensive remediation that the current system is ill-equipped to provide at scale (Singh & Mehta, 2021). This context makes the policy's implementation challenges more acute, as systems must simultaneously address recovery needs while building new ECCE structures (Chatterjee, 2021).

Private sector engagement, while potentially augmenting resources, introduces quality and equity concerns. The policy encourages public–private partnerships for ECCE delivery, but without strong regulatory frameworks, these partnerships risk commercialising early education and exacerbating access disparities between economic groups (Rao, 2019). Lessons from other sectors suggest that market-driven approaches often prioritise profitability over pedagogical quality unless carefully governed (Patel, 2020).

These multifaceted challenges underscore that while NEP 2020's ECCE vision is theoretically robust, its translation into practice requires addressing deeply entrenched systemic barriers. The policy's success will depend not only on its design merits but also on unprecedented political will, coordinated governance, and sustained investment to overcome India's complex implementation realities. Without such concerted efforts, the reforms risk remaining aspirational rather than transformational, particularly for the disadvantaged children whom they aim to benefit most.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the transformative potential of NEP 2020's early childhood care and education (ECCE) reforms through the lens of policy vision, global alignment, and implementation challenges. The findings affirm that the policy represents a significant departure from India's historical approach to early learning, introducing a unified Foundational Stage that integrates play-based pedagogies, multilingual education, and inclusive practices. By anchoring these reforms in neurobiological evidence and global best practices, the NEP 2020 positions India's ECCE framework among progressive international models. However, the research also reveals critical tensions between the policy's aspirations and the systemic realities of India's diverse educational landscape, where infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and governance complexities persist.

Future research should investigate the policies' on-ground adaptations across different socioeconomic contexts, particularly how states navigate the trade-offs between standardisation and localisation. Longitudinal studies tracking the Foundational Stage's impact on learning trajectories will be essential to validate the policy's theoretical assumption.

Moreover, comparative analyses of implementation models could yield insights into scalable solutions for resource-constrained settings. While the NEP 2020 provides a visionary blueprint, its ultimate success will depend on iterative refinements that bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom practice, ensuring equitable access to high-quality early education for all children.

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