



Response to The National Education Policy 2019 for School Education

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Approach of Policy Makers

The NEP is a grand attempt at educational reform in India. The proposals are far reaching, but the educational situation in India needs a radical appraisal. This policy, as a whole, is a significant step in that direction. The policy makers are looking at reforms that will shape India's educational scene over the next two decades. The policy makers take socio-cognitive approach to learning, seeking to ensure that the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy and higher order skills of critical thinking and problem solving are in a context of social awareness and social responsibility. The policy makers address the problems of rote learning that plagues the system, and seeks to shape a policy that addresses this critical weakness. They are also keen to draw on India's heritage and to not merely adopt an educational policy that is solely shaped by western practices.

The policy makers are keenly aware of the demographic dividend that India has, with over 50% of the population below the age of 25. However, this dividend will only last for the next two decades. There is an urgent tone in the policy to see that this opportunity does not go to waste. The policy makers are aware of the policy initiatives of the past and seek to build on them. They have also seen how many of the proposals of past policies were never implemented. This will be the challenge for this policy as well. India is a large complex nation. Any policy will have to engage with this complexity.

The key approach of this policy, that I believe will be the key reason for educational success, is greater autonomy for institutions to shape the educational experiences of our students. This key philosophical shift has the potential to make the proposals of this policy become reality and would be a game-changer for India's educational scene.

It is only when institutions, school complexes, colleges and universities are autonomous and empowered to deliver on the goals of the Policy that we will have a responsive education that is key to achieving a knowledge society(p.31)

To accomplish this, the policy makers propose a regulatory scheme that is to be kept to a "minimum" (p.32). Autonomy and regulations that support reform in education must go hand in hand. Draconian and capricious regulatory diktats that currently strangle our education system must be reformed in lines with this policy if we are to achieve its goals. The centralization of policy into a new body, the Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog, has the potential to play the role of a facilitator of such change or could morph into another regulatory body that tries to dictate how institutions should be run. The proposals in the policy would argue against that. However, history and current practice



would make many skeptical. The policy makers attempt to avoid a repetition of this by transferring most of the regulation to the states.

A key target in view for these policy makers, is the need to prepare the next generation for a knowledge economy that will be the third largest in the world by 2032. Reforms in education, away from a rote-memorization system, to an education system that creates knowledge is imperative to turn India into the knowledge economy it desires to become.

Evaluation of the Policy

1. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): The Foundation of Learning

The policy on ECCE begins with an important, yet neglected, understanding that effective ECCE is necessary for retention and long-term academic success. In an exam-based system, we tend to focus on higher grades and preparation for the examination. Our current system tends to minimize the importance of the early years and this is seen in our curriculum and recruiting. Chapter 1 of the policy addresses this issue by advocating for significant reform in ECCE.

The policy builds on current consensus on child developmental theories, and advocates for a “flexible, multifaceted, multilevel, play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based education.” (p.47). The policy suggests that the current NCERT mandate be expanded to include a curricular and pedagogical framework for ECCE. One key weakness of the policy is its ambiguity in addressing public (government) schools and private schools throughout the first 8 chapters on schools. In the policy proposals for ECCE, we see these ambiguities as well. Their primary focus, in these 8 chapters, is a focus on reform in the public schooling system. But this distinction is not clear in areas that describe elements common to both systems (curriculum, administration etc). They propose to have all aspects of ECCE to be overseen by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This is incongruous with the principle of moving oversight from the center to the states. This has the potential to create problems by ignoring local realities. It is also unclear how the accreditation system for ECCE programs would be administered.

The professionalization of ECCE educators is a needed reform for this policy proposal to have success. Investment in the training of these teachers often receives a low priority in our current practice. Elevating their status is key to elevating the quality of ECCE programs.

2. Foundational Numeracy and Literacy

The policy identifies inadequate numeracy and literacy skills as the key reasons behind a learning crisis that begins in elementary education. This learning crisis is a key reason



behind the high dropout rates in middle and high school. The ECCE policy outlined in chapter 1 is another solution to this problem. They argue that

Schooling in the early years also lays too little curricular emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy and, in general, on the reading, writing, and speaking of languages and on mathematical ideas and thinking. Indeed, the curriculum in early grades moves very quickly towards rote learning and more mechanical academic skills, while not giving foundational material its proper due. (p. 56)

Their argument against the current practices of rote learning are a needed critique of the current system. Their emphasis on numeracy and literacy seems obvious, yet our current practices do little to develop these skills. The focus on reading is a welcome development and requires a cultural shift in the thinking of our schools. The power of reading is not appreciated in our current exam-based education system.

The policy also notes the lack of training in “multilevel, play-based, student-centred style of learning” (p. 56). They address the need for a Pupil Teacher Ratio of (30:1) and the need to be taught in a child’s first language. The need to be taught in one’s “mother tongue” has well attested learning advantages. However, the multilingual setup of India and the use of English in higher education tends to disadvantage these children.

The policy advocates that volunteers from the community be used to advance quality improvements in numeracy and literacy. However, this suggestion seems idealistic and lacks a realistic structure for implementation. The issues related to teacher shortage are also identified but it remains a key challenge toward successful implementation of these policy suggestions. Their suggestion to create pathways for instructional aides to pursue a B.Ed is a positive step towards the issue of teacher shortage. The institution of the National Tutors Programme is interesting as a concept but will be challenging to implement.

The policy lacks vision with regards to use of technology to solve many of these problems. Investment in Learning Management Systems (LMS) and video instruction can provide tremendous learning aids for students where there are teacher shortages. The policy misses the opportunity to see how technology can solve many of these problems.

3. Reintegrating Dropouts and Ensuring Universal Access to Education

The policy makes a strong effort to address this problem. A key strength of the policy is its boldness to propose policy reforms across the spectrum of education. The previous chapters build up to the solutions proposed in this chapter. The policy is aware of the socio-economic factors affecting dropouts. They are also aware of the poor condition of public schools. Their solutions are focused rightly on the public education system. Their solution of investment in infrastructure and tracking of



students in the system are foundational steps to address this issue. Flexibility is needed for students to rejoin the system to ensure 100% GER across school stages. They also recommend loosening the pressure currently created by RTE.

4. Curriculum and Pedagogy in Schools

The goals set about in this chapter are crucial if India is to effectively tap into its demographic dividend over the next twenty years. The restructuring of the school system to a 5+3+3+4 system from the 10+2 system provides an opportunity to shape curriculum and pedagogy to the unique developmental needs of each stage. The proposal for a modular board examination structure over four years can mitigate the exam pressures and exam orientation of our school system. The focus on core concepts and higher order thinking skills appropriately addresses the needs for our students as they enter the 21st century. The orientation towards the modular approach allows for the creation of a more holistic educational system. The policy recognizes the overloading in our current curriculum and advances the need for a reduced curriculum that is more effective at developing critical thinking. The delay for specialization is a great suggestion for students. The proposal also understands that a hard separation of arts and science at the school level is unnecessary and deprives children of a holistic learning experience. The policy also identifies the key subjects and skills to be learned by all students for a knowledge-based economy.

In addition to proficiency in languages, these skills include: scientific temper; sense of aesthetics and art; languages; communication; ethical reasoning; digital literacy; knowledge of India; and knowledge of critical issues facing local communities, States, the country, and the world. (p. 88)

This part of the proposal requires a radical cultural shift in our schooling. Cultural shifts like these take time to adapt. However, a national policy like this might have the power to create a push towards change. A change like this will face significant challenges. Implementation is the key to success. Successful and efficient implementation of a policy has never been a facet of governance in our country. I expect this implementation to be fraught with problems. It will be important for leaders to stay the course if this is to see success. The suggestions for more choice for students will require more teachers. This is difficult when our school system does not even have the adequate number of teachers for basic functioning. The demands for choice will overburden the system even further. The proposal to teach in the mother tongue faces challenges in cosmopolitan settings where children from several language communities are represented. In such a situation, a common language for the medium of instruction must be selected. The hold of English on higher education and employment cannot be overcome and the demands of parents for an English medium education will still persist. The recommendation for bilingual education has the potential to solve the rote-learning problems seen in schools. Many of the policy



proposals on improving the use of Indian languages in schools requires a massive investment by the government towards the creating of content.

5. Teachers

The policy rightly observes the importance of teachers and has recognized the factors that make for effective teachers. There are over 10 lakh teacher vacancies and many of the solutions offered by the policy will not be solved unless this shortage is solved. The current malaise that exists in teacher education colleges exacerbates the problem. The integrated B.Ed is a positive step. Scholarships for students to take up the teaching profession is another good idea. The proposal to stop teacher transfers is an excellent proposal that will benefit government schools. This must be followed by rigorous audits to prevent the ineptitude that currently exists in many government schools.

The shutting down of Teacher Education Institutions (TEI) across the country is a radical suggestion that has the potential to clean out the corrupt system. But what will replace it? In our scenario, where lakhs of vacancies exist, would such a step create more problems than it solves?

6. Equitable and Inclusive Education

The policy identifies the broad ways Underrepresented Groups (URGs) are excluded from education. Access is a key factor. Chapters 1-3 address many of the problems related to these groups. They propose the creation of Special Education Zones, where extra focus and funds are applied to areas where URGs can be best served. Keeping the PTR to 25:1 is a challenging recommendation in the context of high teacher shortage. The focus on girls is also a positive step toward greater justice for women in India. The recommendations for madrasas, maktabas and other religious schools to incorporate NCF recommendations while maintaining their traditions must be addressed carefully. These institutions must be brought into confidence so that these measures will not be seen as an indirect means to interfere in their traditions and religious practices.

7. Efficient Resourcing and Effective Governance through School Complexes

The policy seeks to find an efficient way of organizing school resources by merging public schools into school complexes. Since 28% of public primary schools have less than 30 students, there is an inefficiency due to a lack of scale in these schools. A school complex can be the means to share resources between schools. The policy identifies various problems that have arisen due to these inefficient structures. This structural change can pay dividends through the efficient use of resources, if implemented as proposed.



The idea of school complexes is initially proposed for public schools. But in P7.7.1, the idea of the School Management Committee (SMC) is proposed for private schools as well. This would be disastrous as it would take away management functions from the private management. It would be a de facto takeover by the public. Functions such as performance management of teachers (P7.7.3) are uniquely management functions. For private schools to be included in this is incomprehensible.

8. Regulation and Accreditation of School Education

The move to reduce the regulatory burdens for educational institutions is a welcome one. The policy accurately recognizes that the current regulatory regime has not stopped the commercialization of education and has prevented philanthropic enterprises from entering the fray. The decentralization of regulatory powers to the states is a healthy move. It is unclear whether the State School Regulatory Authority (SSRA) will keep with the policy principle of keeping regulations “to a minimum”. Our experience is that regulations are often made to aid graft rather than serve public interest. There may be hope if the SSRA sticks to the recommendations on pg. 180

Enforcement of regulation will not be driven by the current inspectorial approach. Instead, all relevant information like school infrastructure, teacher resources, including their qualifications, school results in a public examinations, fees, etc. will be put in the public domain for the parents to make informed choices and thereby become the de facto regulator

The delinking of affiliation from the Board of Assessments (BOA) is also a welcome move. This allows the BOA to focus on assessments rather than accreditation. The option to offer multiple BOAs in a school is also a welcome proposal as it increases student choices within an institution. The move to create separate accreditation bodies is also helpful. This can ensure that minimum standards are kept while allowing for schools to initiate steps toward quality that are unique to their institutional context.

The determination of fee is a complex process. Specifying fees for an institution can stifle investment in infrastructure as external bodies do not have the knowledge to stipulate fees. The government must invest heavily in public schools to ensure that commercialization does not win. It is because public schools have fared poorly that private players can exploit the situation. Governments have tried to address the problem of rising fees through arbitrary mechanisms and calculations. Rather than try to set the fees of private schools, governments must invest heavily to improve the public school system. A good quality public school system can naturally reduce market rates for private education.



Conclusion

The policy is a bold venture at addressing the many of the ills of the Indian education system. Institutional autonomy is crucial for many of these policy proposals to have success. There are elements of the proposal that will struggle at the implementation phase. The policy must clearly demarcate between public and private schools and it would bring more harm than good to blend them together. I look forward to seeing many of these proposals take root to lead to a flourishing India.