

September 9, 2020

Aspects of School Education in NEP 2020

Some Innovations, Some Familiar Prescriptions, Many Unrealistic Timelines

By: Devi Kar

The New Education Policy has new as well as old interesting ideas on school education but execution will call for a change in mindsets to broaden horizons and the training of a vast number of highly skilled teachers, all within impossible timelines.

After spending some decades as a school teacher and administrator, I have come to the conclusion that the first and most important thing to fix in our education system is the mode of assessment, the school examination system.

Year after year, I have observed how bright, curious, and creative students change almost instantly once they enter secondary school. They lose their zest for life and learning, and become programmed automatons, focussed on the single task of taking exams and tests efficiently. This is because schools, teachers and parents, all seem to connive at making their lives completely centred on the two public examinations that are held in classes 10 and 12 before they leave school. The worth of a student is mostly measured in terms of examination results (so too the worth of a school).

|| During the secondary school years, students' creativity and thirst for learning beyond the syllabus are ... killed.

Therefore the second half of a student's school life is currently mainly devoted to securing good results. Consequently, these 'wonder years', when they should be learning joyfully and exploring the world with uninhibited curiosity and sense of adventure, are drearily spent preparing for exams.

The nature of each examination – irrespective of the affiliated school board – is such, that students have to learn vast amounts of data, and stock questions have to be answered in set ways.

During the secondary school years, students' creativity and thirst for learning beyond the syllabus are also killed. The learning time for students who are not examination candidates is also affected since a large part of the teaching force is otherwise busy, having been requisitioned to help in carrying out this mammoth yearly exercise. Moreover, every year the absurdly inflated marks that students score in the high school board exams dent the credibility of the assessment system.

I had hoped that the pandemic would expedite much-needed examination reforms, but somehow the 'powers that be' developed an assessment formula of their own for the 2020 board exams, which was neither here nor there. Ultimately, the school board results were based on the performance in the exams of subjects that had been completed before the pandemic struck, together with the internal school test results of the candidates.

Assessment cultures

Soon after, the long-awaited National Educational Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) was made public. The hardest task that NEP 2020 had set itself is the all-important one of "transforming the culture of assessment." To our utmost disappointment, we find that no intrinsic change has been proposed in the mode of assessment.

The policy mentions a centralised examination structure and a declaration that examinations would not require rote learning. This is very welcome as a distinction should certainly be made between the requirement (as now) to retain and recall data, and the necessity to acquire and assimilate knowledge. Further, NEP 2020 mentions that the syllabus would be reduced to accommodate only "core essentials" in order to make the board exams "easier." But we teachers have our reservations as we strongly feel that the rigour of learning should not be completely done away with. The question of "core essentials" will be discussed later in this article.

The proposal in NEP 2020 to set examination papers at two levels, 'standard' and 'advanced'—"beginning with Mathematics"—is an excellent idea. Since students have a stronger aptitude for certain disciplines and have a dislike for others (or for some reason are

unable to perform well in them), it makes sense to have two levels of exams in different subjects. With a combination of standard and advanced level courses in different subjects, all students would at least have a basic knowledge of the core subjects up to the secondary level. This would make allowance for differences in aptitude among students, and would definitely help a large number of “math-phobic” students, who could take the “standard” level of exams in mathematics. This is necessary to prevent a ‘skewed’ educational foundation, in which students leave school with inadequate numeracy skills.

|| [R]ealising the objective of transforming the culture of assessment depends on changing a mindset that is the result of decades of conditioning and reinforcement.

While the examinations proposed by NEP 2020 in classes 3, 5, and 8 may be necessary “to monitor and develop” the school system, they will not be viewed as such. Children will continue to be under constant pressure to ‘perform’, now at three more levels of exams.

In spite of some welcome changes in NEP 2020 in the pattern of the examination papers, a single written examination for all students in the country studying at a particular level, is just not scientific. We practitioners have seen year after year that the examination results fail to indicate individual differences. There should be continuous assessment using other tools to assess students closely, keeping the principle of multiple intelligences in mind. This measure would also reduce examination-related stress that results in tragic suicides by young examinees every year.

We see then that realising the objective of transforming the culture of assessment depends on changing a mindset that is the result of decades of conditioning and reinforcement. We need to change the attitude of adults, especially that of parents and teachers, towards assessment so that children are enabled to take tests in their stride. This is easier said than done. Educating teachers “to be prepared for a transformation in the assessment system by the 2022-23 academic session” seems far from practicable. Yet in the opinion of many school educators, the success of the curriculum policy will, in turn, hinge almost entirely on the success of this single reform of the assessment system.

Learning by the book

Closely associated with the issue of assessment and examinations is the matter of textbooks. NEP 2020 has announced the intention of publishing “high quality and energised books”. Of course, nobody wishes to compromise on the quality of textbooks, especially in a country where, unfortunately, the reference point for most learning and assessment thereof, is the textbook. (Incidentally, what does the term “energised textbook” mean?)

Since private schools and colleges find a respectable place in the general scheme of things, private publishers should also be permitted to publish school textbooks. I have always frowned upon the practice of teachers and students referring to ‘chapters’ and ‘pages’ while teaching a particular topic in the syllabus. This gives out the wrong signal that everything a student should know about a subject, in a given class is encapsulated in a single book. A specific textbook may be prescribed by the school but schools, teachers and students should have the freedom to refer to any book of their choice from among a wide and rich variety of textbooks. Other learning sources such as reference material should also be readily available.

It goes against all educational principles that the schoolchildren of a whole country have to learn from a single set of textbooks. What is imperative is the availability of a wide range of textbooks that also cover the experiences and conditions of different states.

|| What should set off alarm bells about NEP 2020 is the statement that all officially prescribed text books would contain “only essential core material”.

Teachers should also refrain from referring to a single text book in class. In any case, students must be weaned away from text-book-oriented learning. I have a feeling that the problem of heavy schoolbags will disappear if teachers stopped insisting on children bringing their textbooks to school.

What should set off alarm bells about NEP 2020 is the statement that all officially prescribed text books would contain “only essential core material”. The definition of “essential” is relative. The fear is that the content of a textbook may not be accepted by all as “essential” or that what is deemed “essential” by many, may be missing altogether from the textbooks. Therefore, clarity about “core essentials” is vital as experience indicates that unless a topic is included in the syllabus that is to be tested, it is unlikely to be taught

or learnt.

Innovations in the NEP

NEP 2020 deals with many aspects of school education that had already been addressed by the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. These include the need to move away from rote learning, flexibility in examinations, discouraging an overdependence on textbooks and providing for overall development of children.

The objectives that are new in NEP 2020 include universal access to education and retention of all children in school until the secondary level, incorporation of pre-primary schools within the formal ambit of ‘school education’, a multi-lingual approach to teaching and the removal of rigid demarcation between subjects and streams. Most of these have been widely discussed by academicians and policy experts.

From the perspective of a school practitioner, there are some aspects that are of particular interest.

The first is NEP 2020’s call to develop a ‘scientific temper’. This is something Indians have been hearing since Independence. Subodh Mahanti (2016) writes that: “For Nehru science was not merely an individual’s search for truth, but it should be an integral part of one’s thinking and action.” Nehru wanted scientists to spread scientific temper in the country and it was included in many policy statements of the government. Indeed it was enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental duty.

|| The potential “overhaul” that the NEP 2020 boasts of will remain on paper like preceding policy documents unless there is a genuine move to widen people’s mental horizons..

A scientific temper in larger society cannot be achieved easily and certainly not without the concerted will of our leaders to practise what they preach. We as a people are steeped in all kinds of beliefs, notions and assumptions. This state of affairs is further aggravated by our political leaders who are famous for making public statements that reek of unvalidated beliefs and unscientific notions. In this context, it is important to point out that the emphasis on “Knowledge of India” , as in NEP 2020, may be desirable, but the exclusive focus on “luminaries of India in science and beyond” can be limiting. While it is appreciated that children should learn about the greats of their own country, it is important that they should also learn about those giants in the fields of science and technology (as well as the arts and philosophy) from around the world who have contributed to the progress of the human race.

|| It is vital for children to have a balanced education and hands-on vocational training is needed to prepare schoolchildren for the world of work.

The potential “overhaul” that the NEP 2020 boasts of will remain on paper like preceding policy documents unless there is a genuine move to widen people’s mental horizons and change the mindset of people including that of the leaders.

Second, NEP 2020’s call for the inclusion of vocational education from an early stage is an excellent step forward. It is vital for children to have a balanced education and hands-on vocational training is needed to prepare schoolchildren for the world of work. Besides, it gives them a rounded education that would enable them to understand the value of learning a skill, craft or trade; learn about the dignity of labour first hand while moving towards self-sufficiency. In my long teaching career, I have seen far too many people strive for ‘management jobs’ for which they were abjectly unsuitable, whereas they could have pursued an appropriate vocation in which they could have excelled and earned a comfortable living.

The attention that is proposed to be given to gifted or unusually talented children is another welcome idea and one that is long overdue. We have seen over the years how Indian students perceived as ‘ordinary’ in their own country, have blossomed abroad. How often have we rushed to claim award winners and inventors as ours although their higher education, research and work were all carried out in a foreign country? Why is it that we fail to spot talent and nurture it? Perhaps it is because we try to fit all children in the same mould in the years that they spend in school. No wonder that the Ted Talk by Ken Robinson titled “Do schools kill creativity?” attracted 66.3 million hits, making it one of the most popular talks ever.

Improving standards

NEP 2020 states that “public and private schools (except the central government schools) will be assessed and accredited on common minimum criteria.” It is not clear why central government schools have been excluded from this assessment, but the policy clearly states that common standards would be established for public and private school education.

Statistical data indicate that about [half of India’s school going children attend private schools](#) in spite of the higher cost of such schooling. This is because of the perception (justified or not) that private schools are better run than government schools. Besides, the importance given to the teaching and learning of English in private schools is a powerful factor in their favour since it is generally believed that competency in English is a basic requirement in the job market.

Many school educators feel that one of the most laudable features of NEP 2020 is the focus on ‘learning outcomes’.

In order to achieve the same standards, the policy states that teachers of public schools would be adequately trained and given a conducive working environment. Their professional development would be continuous and incentives would be offered throughout their career. There would be a School Quality Assessment and Accreditation Framework (SQAAC) developed by SCERT & NCERT. We look forward to the day when all schools will be of a high standard whether public, private, or run by the central government.

Many school educators feel that one of the most laudable features of NEP 2020 is the focus on ‘learning outcomes’. Hitherto, the concern had been mostly about enrolment and the number of ‘out of school’ children. The quality of learning was ignored. Even the number of toilets in a school seemed to receive greater attention. Hence it was no surprise when Pratham’s Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) disclosed the shockingly poor learning levels at every grade.

Therefore, the proposal of NEP 2020 that there would be continuous tracking of each child’s learning outcomes is reassuring. In fact, the purpose of the proposed examinations in classes 3, 5, and 8 is primarily to track learning outcomes, and to introduce remedial measures and course correction where required. Course correction would include revision of course content in terms of depth and breadth and revision of teaching strategies and goals.

Conclusions

It must be confessed in conclusion that in spite of the many welcome changes that have been envisaged by the new policy, a couple of nagging fears persist in many of us.

Will the standardisation and centralisation that is implied in the structure and governance of school education be appropriate for the widely diverse student population of our country? Will the bid to elevate the level of education quickly and efficiently by adopting a uniform approach, radically change our precious multi-layered and intricate cultural fabric?

In sum, it can be stated that two vital conditions are required if the much-vaunted NEP 2020 is to succeed. The first is the *transformation of mindsets*; the second is the immediate *availability of competent teachers* who are central to the whole project.

[T]here is no clarity as to who will train and develop this vast pool of extraordinary teachers that is expected to emerge in the course of the next two years to shape the future of India’s children.

It is difficult to fathom where the teachers will come from to make this miracle happen. At the moment, not only is there an extreme dearth of skilled schoolteachers throughout India, there is also a crucial shortage of teaching staff of any kind in public schools. Expectedly, a study conducted by a child rights NGO states that “quality education is a far cry for children”. According to reports of a [2018 study](#) by Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability and Child Rights and You, there is a shortage of more than 500,000 teachers in elementary schools and 14% of government secondary schools do not have the prescribed minimum of six teachers. Many schools employ contractual teachers or underqualified para teachers.

The plan for the professional growth of teachers and their retention, as spelt out in NEP 2020, is commendable in parts. But there is no clarity as to who will train and develop this vast pool of extraordinary teachers who are expected to emerge in the course of the next two years to shape the future of India’s children.

The National Education Policy of 2020, has set out to fulfil the aspirations of many Indians and has succeeded in dazzling many school educators. In the end the efficacy of any policy is measured by how it is implemented. NEP 2020 is an exception: it can be critiqued even before it is implemented. This is because of the unrealistic timelines that have been drawn up for meeting far-reaching goals. Overall, NEP 2020 appears to be absurdly overambitious.

References:

Mahanti, Subodh (2016). ‘Nehru’s Vision of Scientific Temper’. *Journal of Scientific Temper* 4.