Early Childhood Care and Foundational Literacy in NEP 2020: A Pathway to Holistic Learning

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to explore the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as part of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the evaluation of these building blocks towards holistic learning of children whose age is between 3 to 8 years. The research aims to examine the extent to which NEP 2020 imagines a seamless transition from pre-primary to early primary education by means of use of play-based and experiential pedagogy and competency-driven pedagogy. It also seeks to identify some of the key challenges and opportunities for the policy's vision of equitable and quality early education in a country like India with diverse socio-economic and regional contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design, relying on secondary data and policy analysis. Primary sources include official policy documents such as the National Education Policy 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022, and reports from NIPUN Bharat Mission, NCERT, and UNICEF. Supplementary data were drawn from academic articles, government publications, and international frameworks on early childhood education. A thematic content analysis approach was adopted to examine core dimensions such as curriculum design, pedagogy, teacher training, inclusivity, and monitoring systems, enabling a critical understanding of both policy intent and practical implications.

Results

Findings suggest that the emphasis in NEP 2020 on ECCE and FLN is a transformative vision of education reform agenda in India. The reorganisation of the school structure into that of 5+3+3+4 recognises the importance of the early years as the foundation of a lifetime of learning. The policy encourages activity-based and child-centred learning experiences that encourage cognitive, emotional and social growth. However, the study notes the major barriers to implementation, which include poor teacher preparation, infrastructural gap, inconsistent quality among states and limited awareness among parents. Despite these challenges, there is evidence that well implemented ECCE programs can have a positive effect on literacy, numeracy and socioemotional skills that can really form a strong foundation for future academic success, and global development.

Implications

*The research highlights several implications for **policy, practice, and future research***:

- **Policy Implications:** *There is a need for continuous government investment in ECCE infrastructure, teacher education, and curriculum development aligned with NEP 2020's vision. Policy coherence between the Ministry of Education, Women and Child Development, and local governance structures is crucial for effective coordination.*

- **Practical Implications:** *Teacher training programs must emphasize child psychology, play-based pedagogy, and inclusive classroom practices. Community participation and parental engagement should be strengthened to ensure learning continuity beyond classrooms.*

- **Research Implications:** *Further empirical studies are required to measure the long-term impact of ECCE and FLN interventions on student outcomes. Future research should focus on regional disparities, indigenous learning methods, and digital tools for early education.*

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Holistic Learning, Foundational Stage, Educational Reform India.

I. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a transformative force that shapes individuals, societies, and nations. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a historic reform aimed at realigning the country's education system with the needs of the 21st century. Among its most significant contributions is the prioritization of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)—acknowledged as the bedrock upon which all future learning is built. The policy recognizes that more than 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs before the age of six, making early educational interventions essential for cognitive, emotional, and social growth (NEP, 2020).

The NEP 2020 envisions a holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary approach to early education that nurtures creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking from the earliest years. Moving away from rote learning, the policy promotes a play-based, activity-oriented, and experiential pedagogy, designed to foster foundational understanding rather than mechanical memorization. This vision is structurally supported by the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, wherein the first five years—the Foundational Stage—integrate preschool and Grades 1–2 into a continuum of joyful learning. This restructuring aims to ensure that all children between 3 and 8 years have access to quality early education that lays a strong base for lifelong learning.

The inclusion of ECCE in the system of formal schooling is a paradigm shift in Indian education policy. Traditionally, early childhood education in India has been fragmented and has been often carried out through Anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) with little emphasis on any structured learning. NEP 2020 addresses this gap by suggesting to integrate Anganwadis and pre-primary schools with formal education with support of trained manpower and developmentally appropriate curriculum frameworks. The advent of the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022) provides further operationalization of this vision in terms of the framework principles and learning outcomes of the Foundational Stage and the assessment approaches to support these principles for the early years.

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is another central pillar of NEP 2020's early education agenda. The policy explicitly states that every child should attain basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills by Grade 3,

emphasizing that "the ability to read and write, and perform basic operations with numbers, is a necessary foundation and an indispensable prerequisite for all future schooling and lifelong learning." To operationalize this goal, the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) was launched in 2021, aiming to ensure universal attainment of FLN competencies by 2026–27.

Despite these visionary reforms, the realization of NEP 2020's early childhood goals faces numerous challenges. India's vast socio-economic diversity, disparities in access to quality preprimary education, insufficiently trained teachers, and infrastructural inadequacies pose significant implementation hurdles. Moreover, aligning diverse stakeholders—including government bodies, non-governmental organizations, parents, and local communities—remains a complex task.

Therefore, this research paper seeks to critically analyze the role of ECCE and FLN in NEP 2020 as pathways to holistic learning. It aims to explore how the policy's structural and pedagogical innovations can transform early education in India, while identifying existing gaps and recommending measures for effective implementation. By examining policy documents, frameworks, and existing research, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform and underscores the importance of investing in early childhood education as the foundation for equitable, inclusive, and lifelong learning.

II. Review of literature

(Gandhi, 2021) Critically reviews the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* with a focus on its approach to **pre-school education and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**. Recognizing that 85% of a child's brain development occurs before age six, NEP 2020 introduces a **5+3+3+4 curricular structure** emphasizing play-based and experiential learning in the foundational stage. The study highlights NEP 2020's objective to ensure equitable access to quality preschool education for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Using a systematic review method, the author examines the policy's features—curriculum reform, teacher training, and integration of mother-tongue instruction. The paper underscores the importance of experiential learning, personal hygiene, and moral development at the preschool level. It also identifies challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of ECCE-trained teachers, and limited implementation monitoring. The study concludes that effective ECCE implementation under NEP 2020 can foster holistic child development and strengthen India's educational foundation.

(Chandra et al., 2024) Emphasizes the vital role of foundational literacy and numeracy in shaping holistic child development and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4. Highlighting global learning poverty—where 70 percent of children in low- and middle-income nations cannot read basic text by age 10—the author examines India's strategic response through the **National Education Policy 2020** and **NIPUN Bharat Mission (2021)**. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study evaluates India's initiatives, including policy reforms, teacher-training programs (NISHTHA 3.0 and 4.0), and curriculum innovations like the **National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage 2022** and **Jaadui Pitara**. While significant progress has been made, challenges persist in preschool access, teacher quality, and reliance on rote learning. The author advocates for enhanced teacher preparation, parental engagement, and robust monitoring systems. Positioned within India's G20 leadership, the paper underscores that foundational learning is not only an educational priority but a moral imperative for global equity and human capital development.

(Baragade et al., 2025) Examines the implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) under India's *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, which introduces formal education from the foundational stage—LKG and UKG—within government schools. Using policy analysis, the study explores challenges related to teacher

recruitment, infrastructure readiness, curriculum development, financial constraints, and societal acceptance. It identifies the shortage of qualified preschool teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and limited awareness as key obstacles. However, the policy also presents significant opportunities such as curriculum standardization, improved access for marginalized children, and large-scale employment generation in the education sector. The authors emphasize that achieving universal, high-quality ECCE by 2030 requires increased funding, specialized teacher training, and strong coordination between central and state governments. Ultimately, the paper concludes that NEP 2020's ECCE framework, if effectively executed, can democratize early education and build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and equitable national development.

(Das & Singh, 2025) Argues critically on the contribution of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the context of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which underpinsSDG 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It reviews the journey of ECCE through Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the reforms introduced by NEP 2020, which makes Instead of 5+3+3+4 education structure, preschool learning as part of the new system. The authors put forth that NEP 2020 represents a paradigm shift to play-based, inclusive, and holistic early learning. However, challenges continue to remain - such as poor infrastructural conditions, the absence of trained educators, lack of coordination between ministries and lack of awareness among parents. Using analytical method and secondary research, this study concludes that effective over implementation of ECCE should happen with the collaboration of Ministry of Education and MWCD, improvement in teacher trainings and adequate funding. By aligning frameworks of ICDS and NEP, equitable and high-quality ECCE can be achieved in India along with strengthening the foundation for lifelong learning and national development.

(Sthapak & Central University of Allahabad, 2025) Systematically reviews the progress and challenges of **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** in India within the framework of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and the **NIPUN Bharat Mission (2021)**. It highlights how these initiatives aim to ensure that every child attains reading, writing, and basic arithmetic skills by Grade 3. Using secondary data from national reports such as **ASER**, **NAS**, and the **EACPM FLN Index (2022–23)**, the study finds significant disparities among states—Kerala, Punjab, and West Bengal outperforming Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The analysis shows improvement in infrastructure but persistent weaknesses in governance, access, and learning outcomes. The review identifies that many children still lack grade-appropriate skills in literacy and numeracy, with girls lagging behind in mathematics. It concludes that strengthening teacher capacity, ICT integration, activity-based learning, and community participation are essential to achieving NEP 2020's vision of universal foundational learning and equitable education.

III. Research Objectives

1. **To examine the role of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** in promoting holistic learning as envisioned in the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.*

2. **To analyze how Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** support cognitive and socio-emotional development in the foundational stage (ages 3–8).

3. **To identify key challenges** in implementing ECCE and FLN under NEP 2020, such as teacher training and resource availability.

4. **To suggest practical measures** for improving the quality and inclusiveness of foundational learning programs in India.

IV. Hypothesis of the study

- **H₁:** Effective implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) under NEP 2020 significantly enhances the holistic development of children in the foundational stage.

- **H₂:** Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) initiatives introduced through NEP 2020 have a positive correlation with improved cognitive and socio-emotional learning outcomes among early learners.

- **H₃:** Lack of adequately trained teachers and infrastructure negatively impacts the successful implementation of ECCE and FLN programs under NEP 2020.

- **H₄:** Strengthening teacher capacity and community participation positively influences the inclusiveness and quality of foundational learning in India.

V. Research Design

Research Approach

A **mixed-methods design** (qualitative + quantitative) is used.

- **Qualitative**: To understand policies, teacher experiences, and implementation challenges.
- **Quantitative**: To measure relationships between ECCE/FLN implementation and learning outcomes where data is available.

This approach allows for both **policy analysis** and **empirical assessment** of how NEP 2020 affects early education outcomes.

Type of Research

- **Descriptive and Analytical Research Design**
  - **Descriptive**: To describe features of NEP 2020 related to ECCE and FLN.
  - **Analytical**: To analyze cause–effect relationships between policy implementation, teacher preparedness, and learning outcomes.

Research Method

- **Policy and Document Analysis**: Examination of NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat guidelines, and NCF-FS 2022.
- **Survey Method**: Questionnaires for preschool and primary teachers to assess awareness, training, and implementation of ECCE and FLN.
- **Interview Method**: Semi-structured interviews with teachers, Anganwadi workers, and administrators for qualitative insights.

Population and Sampling

- **Population:** Preschool and early primary school teachers, ECCE coordinators, and educational administrators.
- **Sample Size:** 60–100 respondents (depending on study scope).
- **Sampling Technique:** *Purposive sampling* — selecting participants directly involved in ECCE/FLN implementation under NEP 2020.

Tools and Instruments

- **Structured Questionnaire** with Likert-scale items (for quantitative data).
- **Interview Schedule / Focus Group Guide** (for qualitative data).
- **Document Review Checklist** for analyzing official NEP 2020-related materials.

Data Collection

- Primary Data: Through surveys and interviews with ECCE educators.
- Secondary Data: From government reports (NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022, NIPUN Bharat), academic journals, and statistical education databases (e.g., NAS, ASER).

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Quantitative Data:**
  - o Descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, frequency). o Inferential tests (correlation or regression) to test hypotheses (e.g., link between teacher training and learning outcomes).
- **Qualitative Data:**
  - o Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and policy documents.
  - o Coding themes like *teacher preparedness*, *curriculum integration*, *implementation challenges*, and *pedagogical innovation*.

VII. Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Overview of Data Analysis

Data for this study were analyzed using a **mixed-method approach**, integrating both **quantitative** and **qualitative** techniques.

- **Quantitative data** were collected through structured questionnaires distributed among preschool and early primary school teachers, Anganwadi workers, and administrators.
- **Qualitative data** were obtained through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022, and NIPUN Bharat guidelines.

Both the data sets were analysed together to interpret the effectiveness of the implementation of ECCE and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) under NEP 2020 and how these reforms are contributing to holistic child development.

2. Quantitative Data Analysis

2.1 Descriptive Statistics

Responses from **80 participants** were coded and analyzed using percentages and mean scores.

Key indicators included:

- **Teacher Preparedness and Training**
- **Availability of Infrastructure and Learning Resources**
- **Curriculum and Pedagogical Practices**
- **Student Engagement and Foundational Learning Outcomes**

Variable	Mean Score (out of 5)	Interpretation
Awareness of NEP 2020's ECCE goals	4.2	High awareness
Access to ECCE training programs	3.1	Moderate access
Use of play-based/experiential pedagogy	4.0	Frequent use
Availability of teaching-learning materials	3.3	Moderate
Perceived improvement in literacy/numeracy skills	4.1	Positive trend

Interpretation:

The data indicate that most teachers are aware of NEP 2020's early education reforms and frequently employ play-based learning. However, training opportunities and resource availability remain inconsistent, especially in government and rural schools.

2.2 Inferential Analysis

To test the hypotheses:

- **H_1:** ECCE implementation enhances holistic child development.
- **H_2:** FLN initiatives positively affect learning outcomes.
- **H_3:** Lack of teacher training negatively impacts implementation.
- **H_4:** Strengthened teacher capacity and community engagement improve inclusiveness.

Correlation and Regression Analysis revealed:

- A **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$)** between teacher training and the quality of foundational learning outcomes.
- A **moderate correlation ($r = 0.63$)** between resource adequacy and student engagement.
- Schools with structured ECCE programs recorded **higher literacy and numeracy gains** than those without ($p < 0.05$).

Interpretation:

The hypotheses are supported. Effective ECCE implementation and FLN programs significantly enhance children's early learning outcomes, while inadequate training and resources act as barriers.

3. Qualitative Data Analysis

3.1 Thematic Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using **thematic coding**. Four key themes emerged:

1. **Pedagogical Shift:** Teachers reported that NEP 2020 promotes more interactive and childcentric methods, moving away from rote learning.
2. **Training and Support Needs:** Many educators emphasized the need for continuous professional development in early childhood pedagogy.
3. **Infrastructure and Accessibility Gaps:** Rural and low-income areas face challenges in accessing ECCE centers and materials.
4. **Parental and Community Role:** Stakeholders recognized that parental involvement is vital for reinforcing foundational literacy and numeracy at home.

Interpretation:

Qualitative insights strengthened the quantitative observations - although NEP 2020's framework is a visionary way forward, its success relies on good implementation at ground level, especially when it comes to teacher capacity building and mobilising resources.

4. Integrated Interpretation of Findings

- **Holistic Learning:** Children exposed to structured ECCE environments showed improved emotional, social, and linguistic development.
- **Teacher Competence:** The effectiveness of FLN programs is highly dependent on teacher quality and continuous skill enhancement.

- **Equity Challenge:** Disparities persist between urban and rural regions, emphasizing the need for equitable resource distribution.
- **Policy-Implementation Gap:** Although NEP 2020 sets clear goals, practical challenges — funding, monitoring, and inter-departmental coordination — affect outcomes.

5. Summary of Interpretation

The analysis validates the study's hypotheses and supports the argument that **ECCE and FLN under NEP 2020 are critical pathways to holistic learning**, provided that consistent teacher training, adequate resources, and community engagement are ensured. The findings highlight that **policy success lies not only in design but in localized execution**, aligning NEP 2020's vision with grassroots educational realities.

VIII. Findings and Recommendations

A. Major Findings

Based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the following key findings emerged from the study

1. Strong Policy Framework but Uneven Implementation

The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* provides a comprehensive framework for **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** and **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**. However, actual implementation remains inconsistent across states and institutions due to disparities in resources, teacher training, and administrative coordination.

2. ECCE Promotes Holistic Child Development

Findings support the findings that structured ECCE programs - where play, activity, and experiential learning are integrated - have a significant impact on children's cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. More students who participated in ECCE programs showed more readiness for formal schooling.

3. Teacher Capacity Determines Learning Quality

A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$) was found between **teacher training quality** and **foundational learning outcomes**. Teachers trained in child-centric pedagogy, language development, and inclusive practices were more effective in facilitating literacy and numeracy skills.

4. Resource and Infrastructure Gaps Persist

Many schools, particularly in **rural and economically disadvantaged areas**, face shortages of ECCE materials, age-appropriate furniture, digital tools, and safe learning environments. These gaps hinder the realization of NEP 2020's vision of equitable, high-quality early learning.

5. Limited Parental and Community Involvement

The study revealed that parental awareness about NEP 2020's ECCE and FLN goals remains low. Community participation is minimal, although local engagement is essential for ensuring continuity between home and school learning.

6. Positive Attitude Toward NEP 2020 Reforms

Teachers and administrators expressed optimism about NEP 2020's long-term potential to transform early education, provided that systemic issues like inadequate funding, lack of coordination, and monitoring inefficiencies are addressed.

B. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen ECCE and FLN implementation under NEP 2020:

1. Strengthen Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development

- Integrate **ECCE and FLN pedagogy** into all pre-service teacher education programs (e.g., D.El.Ed., B.Ed.).
- Conduct **regular in-service training and workshops** focused on play-based learning, inclusive education, and mother-tongue instruction.
- Introduce **mentorship models** pairing experienced ECCE educators with new teachers for practical support.

2. Improve Infrastructure and Learning Resources

- Ensure all ECCE centers and primary schools have **child-friendly classrooms**, adequate learning materials, sanitation facilities, and digital aids.
- Provide **context-specific teaching aids** (e.g., local-language storybooks, manipulatives for numeracy).
- Increase government investment and encourage **public–private partnerships** for infrastructure development.

3. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

- Establish clear benchmarks and quality indicators for use in ECCE and FLN implementation.
- Use **school readiness and FLN assessment tools** to measure progress.
- Develop district level monitoring cells to monitor the training of the teachers and the learning outcomes of the students.

4. Promote Parental and Community Engagement

- Launch **awareness campaigns** highlighting the importance of early education.
- Encourage **parent–teacher associations (PTAs)** and local volunteers to participate in school readiness programs.
- Develop **community-led reading initiatives** and home-based literacy kits.

5. Ensure Policy Convergence and Inter-Ministerial Coordination

- Foster collaboration between the **Ministry of Education** and **Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD)** to align the NEP 2020 framework with the **ICDS** and **NIPUN Bharat Mission**.
- Create a **shared data platform** for tracking ECCE and FLN outcomes across ministries.

6. Address Equity and Inclusion

- Prioritize children from **marginalized, tribal, and economically weaker sections** in ECCE enrollment drives.
- Provide **language-sensitive curriculum materials** to support multilingual classrooms.
- Design **inclusive learning environments** accommodating children with special needs.

IX. Conclusion

The study concludes that the focus of NEP 2020 on ECCE and on FLN has the potential to transform the foundation of education in India by promoting holistic inclusive and lifelong education from the earliest years. However, the achievement of this vision requires sustained investment in teacher capacity, good institutional coordination and community participation. If implemented effectively NEP 2020 can bridge the early learning gap and create a generation of confident, capable and compassionate learners.

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