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Reimagining Pedagogical Practices for 21st-Century Classrooms: Insights from NEP 2020

Sita Bhoi [1*], Dr. Praveen Bobby Binjha [2]
[1] Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India
[2] Faculty, CIET, NCERT, New Delhi, India

Corresponding Author: * Sita Bhoi

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Abstract

The 21st-century landscape, along with its holistic transformations, necessitates a shift in classroom pedagogical practices. Moving away from traditional aims, education now focuses on developing skilled and 21st-century competent citizens in response to contemporary global demands. In this context, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for learner-centred and multidisciplinary teaching-learning approaches that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, rather than producing mere theoretical learners. The policy emphasises comprehensive pedagogies that are holistic, inclusive, personalised, and that integrate technology as an essential component. The overarching goal is to nurture creative minds with strong decision-making abilities, contributing to a sustainable world and society. This paper aims to explore the pedagogical shifts proposed by NEP 2020 and examine the challenges associated with their implementation at the ground level.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, rapid transformations across different sectors have also influenced the field of education (UNESCO, 2020; Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, 2024; William & Hogan, 2020) [22, 23, 7, 25]. Traditional teacher-centred classrooms are gradually being replaced by learner-centred approaches that emphasise active participation, critical thinking, and experiential learning. The focus of education has moved beyond mere knowledge acquisition toward skill development, creativity, and practical problem-solving abilities (OECD, 2019) [12]. Recognizing the demands of the 21st-century world, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 plays a significant role in reforming the Indian education system to develop informed, skilled, scientifically aware, and globally responsible citizens (Ministry of Education, 2020; Choudhary & Kumar, 2023; Ashokkumar, Raj, Rajadurai, Abishini, & Anchani, 2024) [10, 4, 2,]. The policy seeks to make the teaching–learning process more dynamic, holistic, multidisciplinary, inclusive, and technology-integrated. It also promotes personalised learning while preserving the valuable foundations of existing educational ideas and practices (Ashokkumar, Raj, Rajadurai, Abishini, & Anchani, 2024; Reddy & Sharma, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2020) [2, 15, 10].

This paper explores the vision and insights of NEP 2020 in redefining the structure, dimensions, and functioning of classrooms in the context of holistic growth and overall development.

Pedagogical vision of NEP 2020

The key visions of the NEP 2020 are basically to take learning away from rote memorisation and gain theoretical knowledge to competency and skill-based learning. The pedagogical framework prescribed by the policy document is as follows.

1. **Holistic and multidisciplinary**
   As the policy aims at holistic development of learners, it replaces the disciplinary barriers between various arts, science, and commerce subjects with multidisciplinary courses and subjects. The integration of various subjects from different disciplines aims at fostering the multidimensional development of an individual (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 11–13, 15–18, 42–46) [10].
2. **Experiential learning**
   Shifting the learning system away from rote memorisation, the policy aims to foster learning by doing, through exploration and discussion, and in real-world application of the theoretical knowledge learned. Thus, reducing students' cognitive load and making learning an enjoyable act that enables them to retain and become lifelong learners rather than exam-oriented ones (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 13–14, 16–18, 35–37) [10].
3. **Critical thinking and problem solving**
   The conceptual understanding is prioritised over memorisation of facts and information for exams to develop real-world applications. By empowering learners with the ability to analyse, question, and develop reasoning ability, the policy aims at creating citizens with critical thinkers and real-world problem solvers. Thus, enabling the application of learned theoretical knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 12–13, 16–18, 42–45) [10].
4. **Flexibility of choice**
   Shifting away from the universalised subjects to providing the option for choosing the subjects as per their interest and ability, the policy enables a multidisciplinary approach to the educational environment. The rigid separation of subjects aims to be replaced with flexibility choice of subjects. The categorisation of students and subjects aims to be removed and make the learning system a comprehensive one that provides various skills and personalised experiences to each learner (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 16–19, 21–23, 43–46) [10].
5. **Technological integration**
   To make learning inclusive, more accessible, and flexible, the policy emphasises technological integration. It prescribes the use of online learning platforms, digital tools, and virtual labs to make learning more interactive, so that the learning becomes barrier-free for every learner, irrespective of any disability or limitations (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 18–20, 36–38, 44–46) [10].

The policy aims at reforming the existing pedagogical practices in alignment with the 21st-century demand. The shift is presented below in table1.

Table 1: The policy aims at reforming the existing pedagogical practices in alignment with the 21st-century demand

Existing pedagogical practices	NEP 2020 envisions 21st-century pedagogical practices
The pedagogical system was predominantly teacher-centred and mainly emphasised the accumulation of content knowledge.	It focuses on a learner-centred education system that promotes conceptual understanding, practical application of knowledge, and competency-based learning.
Rote learning and memorisation were considered necessary for achieving high marks in examinations.	It emphasises experiential, discussion-based, and competency-based education aimed at developing skills and competencies.
The pedagogical approach treated curricular and extracurricular activities as separate aspects of education.	It integrates pedagogical practices that cater to both curricular and extracurricular needs.
The existing pedagogical practices offered a limited scope for vocational education.	Vocational education and skill development are integral components of 21st-century pedagogical practices.
Existing pedagogical practices maintained strict boundaries between various subjects and disciplines.	Pedagogical practices promote a multidisciplinary approach aimed at the holistic development of learners.
A one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach was followed for all learners in the same class."	Pedagogical practices that are inclusive and adaptable to diverse learner needs
The use of technology as a pedagogical tool was restricted and implemented only when conditions allowed.	Technology is used as an integral and essential component of pedagogical practices.
Within the existing pedagogical practices, student achievement was largely determined by examination scores.	In contemporary pedagogical practices, student achievement is evaluated through the skills and competencies they acquire and demonstrate.
Pedagogical practices primarily focused on the development of cognitive skills.	The emphasis of pedagogical practices is on developing higher-order thinking skills and ensuring holistic development.
Pedagogical practices aim at enabling learners to learn what to think.	The focus of pedagogical practices is on developing learners' ability to think and reason.

Key characteristics of pedagogical practices aligned with NEP 2020

Shifting the focus from traditional content accumulation and mark scoring examination system towards skill and competency-based education focus, the NEP 202 doesn't only aim at changing the curriculum, but also the pedagogical practices so as to inculcate the 21st century skills among learners. According to NEP 2020, the modern pedagogical practices must be characterised by the following features to build informed, skilled, and competent citizens.

1. **Learner-centred pedagogy**
   The policy focuses on transforming traditional teacher-centred classrooms into learner-focused environments. Instead of acting only as instructors, teachers take on the role of guides and facilitators who support and encourage students throughout the learning process. Students are encouraged to participate actively in discussions, activities, and problem-solving rather than remaining passive listeners. Learning becomes a two-way interactive process where both teachers and learners engage meaningfully with each other. The pedagogy places learners at the centre of education and adapts according to their individual needs, interests, abilities, and learning pace. In this way, it recognises and values the unique strengths and limitations of every learner while promoting a more inclusive and effective learning experience (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 12–14, 15–18, 35–37) [10].
2. **Experiential learning**
   To make education more learner-centred, the policy promotes experiential learning as an important pedagogical approach. This method makes learning more practical, participatory, and inclusive for students. It encourages the use of activity-oriented teaching practices at every stage of education. The approach includes hands-on activities, project work, arts and sports-integrated learning, storytelling, role play, educational games, collaborative discussions, and field-based experiences. These methods are intended to become essential features of 21st-century classrooms, helping learners connect knowledge with real-life situations while developing creativity, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 13–14, 16–18, 35–37) [10].
3. **Competency-based learning**
   NEP 2020 emphasises helping learners gain a clear understanding of concepts and use their knowledge effectively in everyday life. The policy focuses on developing the competencies required in the 21st century, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, creativity, and social-emotional skills. It seeks to nurture individuals holistically by promoting not only cognitive growth but also emotional, social, ethical, and practical development, thereby preparing responsible and capable citizens for modern society (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 12–14, 16–18, 42–45) [10].
4. **Multidisciplinary and holistic learning**
   The policy seeks to eliminate rigid boundaries between disciplines such as Arts, Science, and Commerce, humanities, and sports, allowing learners to select subjects according to their interests, talents, and career aspirations. This flexible approach encourages students to explore knowledge across different fields and understand issues from diverse perspectives. Connecting learning with real-life experiences, it promotes deeper understanding, critical thinking, and the habit of lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 15–19, 42–46) [10].
5. **Foundational literacy and numeracy**
   The policy recognises that basic literacy and numeracy are essential foundations for developing higher-order skills in the future. It states that the ability to read, write, and perform basic mathematical operations is a crucial prerequisite for all further schooling and lifelong learning. To support this, the pedagogy at the foundational stage should focus on building these skills through play-based and activity-oriented learning. This approach aims to make early learning enjoyable and ensure a smooth, stress-free transition to more advanced stages of education (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 10–12, 14–15) [10].
6. **Flexible and inclusive learning**
   The shift away from uniform, one-size-fits-all classroom practices allows learners greater flexibility in selecting subjects, learning pathways, and the pace of their learning. It also supports multidisciplinary study options and provides multiple entry and exit points within the education system. The approach promotes inclusive pedagogy so that learners with disabilities can participate meaningfully alongside their peers in the classroom. Overall, the focus is on ensuring that every learner receives appropriate support so that no one is excluded or left behind due to differences in learning abilities. Inquiry-based and discovery-based learning (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 15–19, 42–46) [10].
7. **Technology-integrated learning**
   Through technology-integrated pedagogy and the use of digital tools, the policy aims to reduce barriers to access and make learning more interactive, engaging, and personalised. The integration of advanced tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and digital laboratories helps learners actively participate in the learning process by providing more realistic and experiential understanding rather than passive instruction. Instead of treating technology as an optional or occasional support, it is expected to be embedded as an essential component of everyday classroom teaching and learning practices (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 18–20, 36–38, 44–46) [10].
8. **Formative and continuous assessment**
   The assessment system is envisioned as a shift from a one-time, exam-oriented model to a more flexible, competency-based approach. It places greater emphasis on formative assessment carried out in the classroom through activities such as group work, individual tasks, and project-based learning. Teachers are expected to continuously observe and evaluate students' progress rather than relying only on uniform, end-of-term examinations. This ongoing process helps in identifying learning gaps early and enables timely

feedback and support to improve student learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 21–23, 36–37) [10].

9. **Skill and vocational integration**
   To prepare learners for real-world work and essential life skills, the policy promotes the integration of vocational education across both school and higher education levels. It encourages exposure to vocational learning from the middle school stage itself. Through vocationally integrated pedagogy, students learn through practical engagement and hands-on experiences. Areas such as agriculture, coding, carpentry, and healthcare are included to help learners develop relevant skills. By embedding vocational education within the mainstream curriculum, the policy also aims to uphold the dignity of labour while equipping students with employable skills, practical competencies, and readiness for real-life situations (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 19–21, 44–46) [10].
10. **Collaborative learning**
    Collaborative learning is encouraged in the policy through classroom practices where students engage in pair-share activities and group work. It includes group discussions, project-based tasks, problem-solving exercises, and peer learning opportunities. Through these methods, learners develop effective communication skills, teamwork, and social interaction abilities. It also provides a platform for students to learn from one another in a shared learning environment. In this way, both cognitive skills and social-collaborative competencies are strengthened together (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 16–18, 36–37) [10].
11. **Ethical and value-based learning**
    When the policy aims at the holistic development of learners, ethical and value-based education plays an important role. It seeks to nurture moral values such as honesty, empathy, respect, responsibility, cooperation, and social awareness through both curriculum and classroom practices. These values are reinforced through appropriate pedagogical approaches so that learners grow into informed and responsible citizens capable of contributing to a sustainable society. The focus is on developing a strong sense of social responsibility, enabling students to act as positive and constructive members of society both now and in the future (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 11–12, 17–19, 42–43) [10].

The strategies for implementing the pedagogical practices

Mere implementation of these pedagogical practices at the ground level is not possible without reforms in several key areas. To support the effective implementation of NEP 2020-aligned pedagogies, a number of important strategies have been adopted. The first major step has already been taken through reforms in the school curriculum and teacher education programmes (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 12–20, 34–38; Amin, 2025; Maiti, Acharya, Maiti, & Sultana, 2024) [10, 1, 9]. These reforms enable teachers to adopt and practice learner-centred and competency-based educational approaches effectively. In addition, appropriate policy formulations have been introduced to create opportunities for practising inclusive educational methods in classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to develop professional competencies, modern pedagogical skills, and the digital competencies required in the 21st century. Special emphasis is also given to developing technological skills so that teachers can effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning processes (Maiti, Acharya, Maiti, & Sultana, 2024) [9].

Furthermore, teachers need to acquire the ability to manage inclusive classrooms and address the diverse learning needs of students. Along with this, strong institutional support and effective leadership are essential for ensuring the successful implementation of these pedagogical practices in schools.

Probable Challenges in Implementation

Several challenges may hinder the effective implementation of 21st-century pedagogical practices in the education system. Some of the major challenges are discussed below:

1. **Digital Divide**
   A significant challenge is the digital divide that still exists in many parts of India. Several rural and remote areas continue to face problems such as a lack of electricity, poor internet connectivity, and inadequate transportation and communication facilities. Limited access to digital devices and technology creates difficulties in implementing technology-based teaching and learning practices effectively (Venkatesh, Arumugam, & Sharma, 2022; Sharma, 2023; UNESCO, 2020) [22, 23].
2. **Rigid Mindset and Resistance to Change**
   Another major challenge is the resistance to change among some teachers and educational stakeholders. Traditional teaching methods are still widely preferred in many institutions. Lack of proper training, orientation, and continuous professional development programmes often makes teachers hesitant to adopt innovative and learner-centred pedagogical approaches (Singh & Mehta, 2024; Sharma & Verma, 2023) [18, 20].
3. **Infrastructural Constraints**
   Inadequate infrastructure in schools and educational institutions also acts as a barrier to implementation. Shortage of smart classrooms, digital tools, teaching-learning materials, and other essential facilities limits the effective practice of modern pedagogical methods in classrooms (Pelila, Bag-ongan, Talania, & Wakat, 2022; Ramavath, 2021; Sharma, 2023) [13, 14, 16].
4. **Gap Between Policy and Practice**
   Although educational policies promote progressive and inclusive pedagogical reforms, translating these policies into actual classroom practices remains a challenge. Administrative difficulties, insufficient resources, lack of monitoring, and limited institutional support often prevent stakeholders from implementing the reformed pedagogical practices effectively at the ground level (Garai, 2025; Bremner, Zahedi, Venkat, Iyer, & Jaffer, 2025; Fernandes, 2024) [6, 3, 5].

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 seeks to transform India's education system to address the evolving needs of the 21st century. Its vision has the potential to create meaningful

progress in society through innovative teaching methods, skill-oriented learning, and holistic educational practices. However, several challenges may affect its successful implementation, including the gap between policy and practice, resistance to change, inadequate infrastructure, and the digital divide. To overcome these barriers, coordinated efforts are required from policymakers, curriculum designers, educational institutions, teachers, and other stakeholders involved in the learning process (Singh & Singh, 2020; Singh & Singh, 2025) [19, 21]. Strengthening teacher education and equipping educators with modern pedagogical tools and technological competencies can help create future-ready classrooms (Mishra and Mishra, 2019; Sharma, 2021; Madden, 2023) [11, 17, 8]. Effective integration of technology with inclusive teaching practices will not only improve learning outcomes but also promote equality and accessibility in education (Sharma, 2021) [17]. In this way, the vision of an inclusive classroom can contribute to building an inclusive India and, ultimately, a more inclusive and sustainable world**.**

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About the Corresponding Author

Sita Bhoi is a Ph.D. scholar in the Department of Education at Ravenshaw University. Her academic interests include educational psychology, teaching-learning methodologies, inclusive education, curriculum studies, and student development. She is actively engaged in research, academic writing, and educational development initiatives.