



National Education Policy 2020 and skill development: A child rights and social policy perspective

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Received 13 March 2026; Accepted 22 Apr 2026; Published 18 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.5.S2.121-124>

Abstract

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 became one of the key public policy changes that introduced the reform of the quality of the education system and the development of skills in Indian children. The research analyzed the NEP 2020 in terms of child rights and social policy and attempted to comprehend how the policy has contributed to inclusive, equitable, and skill-oriented education. The emphasis on this policy was considered critical as the prospect of education and skills formation will be critical towards future opportunities and social ladder of children who will have to live in a country characterized by high levels of social and regional inequalities. It was a qualitative research study, which is based on all secondary data. As the primary source, the document analysis of National Education Policy 2020 was used, and the sources such as the government reports, policy documents, and academic literature on education reform and child development in India were reviewed. These aspects of the analysis focused on curriculum changes, pre-vocational education, and flexible learning routes, and institutional supportive mechanisms. The results showed that NEP 2020 gave more focus to child-centered education through encouraging experiential learning, exposure to skills at an early age, and incorporation of vocational education into the school system. Such measures can improve the learning results and equip the children with higher education and employment. Nevertheless, issues like the lack of trained teachers, digital inequality, and unequal capacity of states may become obstacles to successful implementation. The research has concluded that NEP 2020 offers a strong policy framework but its success will depend on the success of good governance, funding, and implementation.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Child rights, Social policy, Skill development, Secondary data, Education reform, India

Introduction

Education has traditionally been a pathway for social mobility in India, but it struggles with persistent access, quality, and outcomes inequalities for disadvantaged children. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, adopted by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, stands as a landmark public policy reform, superseding the 1986 policy and proposing a comprehensive, inclusive and skill-based approach to equip Indian children for a rapidly changing world. This transition is essential in a country beset with glaring regional, socio-economic and caste inequalities, where more than 250 million children traverse educational pathways that often reinforce, rather than break, the chains of poverty (Ashokkumar, Russel Raj, Rajadurai, Abishini, & Anchani, 2025).

NEP 2020 fundamentally redesigns the school system to a 5+3+3+4 model (ages 3 to 18), which prioritises early literacy, practical learning, multilingualism, and early vocational education (from Class 6). This aligns with constitutional provisions such as Article 21A (Right to Education) and Article 39(f) (opportunities for child development), granting RTE-like rights to early years and higher secondary, and prioritising

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) through scholarships, gender-inclusion funds, and special education zones. Through child-centred teaching approaches (play, internships, holistic curricula), NEP seeks to develop critical, creative and vocational skills to prepare children for the jobs of the future, tackling the youth employability crisis in India (40-45% graduates prepared) (PMINDIA, 2020)^[8].

From the perspective of child rights and social policy, NEP 2020 promotes equity by requiring universal access, competency-based and technology-based learning with equity safeguards, as captured in UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. It shifts away from rote-learning towards interdisciplinary learning of arts, sports, coding and crafts to empower children to rise the social ladder in high inequality societies. But success depends on addressing implementation issues, such as teacher shortages, technology gaps and interstate disparities, which may compromise equity (Gupta & Verma, 2025)^[6].

This qualitative research examines NEP 2020's role in advancing child rights and skills through secondary data, focusing on document analysis of the policy text and

complemented with government documents and academic literature. It examines curriculum changes, pre-vocational education, flexible paths and institutional arrangements for their merits (such as hands-on learning) and impediments to equity. As India is expected to reap a demography dividend by 2040, it's crucial to understand NEP's potential for policy improvement and social justice. This study examines the National Education Policy 2020 from a child rights and social policy perspective. The study addresses two objectives: first, to analyse the provisions of NEP 2020 in terms of child rights and equitable education; second, to assess how far this policy promotes competency development among school going children. The present study is guided by two basic research questions: to what extent NEP 2020 promotes child rights within the Indian education system and how far this policy promotes skill development among children.

Theoretical framework

The study is based on the Child Rights Approach- principles embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This perspective affirmed education as a basic right for every child, emphasizing non-discrimination in access to quality education and inclusion for all children. It emphasizes the role of the State to provide all children, especially with a special focus on marginalized/liberated background, an environment that promotes his or her wholesome development, protection and participation in society (United Nations, 1989). Social Justice Theory is the other theoretical framework upon which this study builds as it focuses on equality and equity in education. According to this view, it also states that the resource and opportunities should be made available for all outsiders regardless of socio-economic caste or region. Need for social justice in education & role of National Education Policy 2020 Especially in evidence to India where we have some or other kind of inequality exist which need to be addressed by providing inclusive and equitable learning environment (Government of India, 2020)^[5].

This study also draws on the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen, which views education as a means of expanding individuals capabilities and life choices. This method views the education as more than spoiling knowledge but rather an improvement of a potential human decision making life. It examines educational policies that can improve the skills and opportunities of children as well as their well-being in a way that contributes to sustained social development and growth over the long term (Sen, 1999)^[12].

Literature review

India's education system has seen progressive reforms from the National Policy on Education 1986, which expanded access but was criticised for rote learning and equity gaps, to the transformative National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which envisions equitable, multidisciplinary and skill-based education (Soni, 2023)^[15]. Grounded in child rights discourse, NEP builds on Article 21A of the Indian Constitution and Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act

2009, which ensures free education for 6-14 years, but misses out on preschool and post-compulsory years; NEP makes amends through a 5+3+3+4 structure (ages 3-18) with targeted governance interventions for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) - SC/STs, girls, and children with disabilities - through mandatory 25% EWS quotas in private schools, gender-inclusion funds, special education zones, and accessible infrastructure, thus implementing UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principles of non-discrimination, survival and development (Goswami, 2019)^[4]. NEP's child-focused pedagogies (e.g., play-based learning, 360 degree report cards, fine-tuning of no-detention policy to stem dropouts, disproportionately affecting marginalised children with over 20% attrition rates in secondary schooling) receive praises in empirical studies but critiques point to implementation gaps such as court delays in RTE implementation and socio-cultural challenges in widening urban-rural gaps. In vocational skills, NEP's advocacy for vocational education from Class 6, incorporating bagless days, industry internships, and 43 CBSE-recognised subjects (e.g., coding, AI, robotics, traditional crafts) aligns with national programs like Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) to tackle the skills gap where only 45-50% of graduates are job-ready, especially from marginalised backgrounds (Pratap & Biragoni, 2025)^[9]. Additional literature highlights NEP's multilingual policy (mother tongue teaching until Grade 5) and integration of technology (e.g., DIKSHA platform, National Educational Technology Forum) as equity accelerators, yet highlights digital divides - with 60% rural households lacking internet - teacher shortages (more than 1 million required), and lack of congruence between federal and state capacities as continuing barriers (Singh, 2024)^[13]. Other research highlights NEP's multilingual policies (mother tongue medium up to Class 5) and tech integration (e.g., DIKSHA platform, National Educational Technology Forum) as equity measures, but points to digital divides (60% rural households without internet), teacher shortages (over 1 million required) and federal-state capacity misalignments as bottlenecks. International comparisons with play-based models (Finland) or Germany's dual vocational pathways place NEP as an innovation, but emphasis the need for longitudinal evidence of learning and social mobility outcomes. Overall, the evidence validates NEP 2020's comprehensive blueprint for child rights and skills development in an unequal society, but also stresses better governance, 6% GDP investment in education, and responsive monitoring to operationalise NEP's promise of equity (Swarup, 2025)^[17].

Research methodology

This research uses only secondary data. Primary sources include the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 policy document, which is the central document for evaluating its provisions related to child rights, equity and skills building. These are complemented by reports from the Ministry of Education and other government agencies, and scholarly

journal articles on education reform, child rights and social policy in India. The primary approach is document analysis, which includes reviewing and coding these documents to extract and categories themes such as curriculum reform, pre-vocational education integration, flexible pathways and mechanisms. This qualitative method allows for a targeted, desk-based analysis to assess NEP 2020's merits and challenges in implementation without conducting primary research.

Key features of NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for child-centred learning, moving away from rote learning and towards holistic development based on individual needs, interests, and abilities, through play and activity-based pedagogies in early classes to build critical thinking, creativity and emotional development. Central to this is experiential learning, or "learning by doing", integrated through projects, applications, internships and discussions across curriculum, fostering problem-solving, flexibility, and competency-based learning as envisaged in NEP's multidisciplinary approach (Singh, Chandel, & Rao, 2025) [14]. Skills are introduced early in the formative years, embedding practical skills such as coding, arts and crafts into academic programs to build lifelong competencies from the age of 3. Vocational education is integrated into schools, with a gradual roll-out to reach 50% learners by 2025, eroding labor stigma with credit-based systems and local industry connections. Open learning pathways allow multiple exit and choice options (no streams), academic and vocational hybrids, catering to varied needs and pace (Saharia & Mazumdar, 2024) [11].

Focus on skill development

NEP 2020 promotes pre-vocational education in early classes (6-9), introducing bagless days for skill exposure and linking with local opportunities to meet competency gaps. School curricula are infused with vocational streams via 43 CBSE choices (e.g., AI, robotics, agriculture), meshed with mainstream schooling for dignified work (Government of India, 2020) [5]. Theory and practice are combined through internships, guest sessions and NSQF-linked modules, enhancing employability in a country facing a skill shortage with less than 5% of people aged 19-24 having formal skills. In all, these measures equip students for work, promoting employability, innovation, and resilience in an ever-changing economy (Thinking Juggernaut, 2020) [18].

Analysis: contributions to child rights and equity

NEP 2020 makes substantial strides in children's rights through fair access and skills development to counter social disparities through remedial programs for foundational literacy, engaging the community through clusters of schools, and providing for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and thus complies with constitutional goals such as Article 45 (free education) and Article 46 (welfare of the marginalised). Experiential and flexible pathways (including multiple subject choices, academics-vocational streams, and

anywhere-anytime credits) empower vulnerable children by curbing drop-outs and promoting upward mobility in India's hierarchical society, where regional variation leads to exclusion (Chaudhary & Kumar, 2026) [3]. Pre-vocational skills such as coding, artificial intelligence, crafts, and internships begin in middle school (Class 6), linking directly with Article 39(f) of the Directive Principles requiring the state to promote children's health and development opportunities, and closing theory-practice gaps for employability. Institutional mechanisms, such as National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) for ongoing teacher training and PARAKH as a national assessment centre for equitable and standardized tests, enhance system-level capacity for quality, child-focused delivery in various settings (Srivastava, 2024) [16]. However, NEP's equity aspirations, derived from UN SDGs (Goal 4) and the "no one left behind" principle, require legal extension of RTE beyond Class 8, increased funding (aiming for 6% GDP) and infrastructure to address digital and teacher gap issues that contribute to urban-rural divides (Rangarajan, Sharma, & Grové, 2025) [10].

Implementation challenges

Despite NEP 2020's strengths, implementation is hindered by various obstacles, including acute teacher shortages, with over 1 million vacant teacher positions, mainly at elementary levels and plenary in rural areas, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and minimal experiential delivery, and insufficient scholars (368th Parliamentary Committee Report, 2025). There are digital divides and urban-rural gaps, with only 35-40% of rural households having internet access, compared to over 70% of urban households, leaving remote students excluded from blended learning and tech-integrated curriculum (UDISE+ 2023-24). This leads to uneven NEP 2026 adoption in 2026, with states like Bihar lagging in infrastructure and others advancing well, while funding remains inadequate, falling short of 6% of the GDP, with bureaucratic resistance playing a part (Mungali, 2025). Marginalized groups, including SC/ST, women and Divyangjan, face systemic barriers to vocational access due insufficient master trainers, poor rural infrastructure and low participation rate per gender and caste (e.g. M-OBC at 2%), in determination of skill equity. Teacher insufficiency hurts skills quality, digital handicaps hinder equity, state disparities cause uneven implementation, and inclusivity inequity leaves SEDGs marginalized. Mitigation demands massive capacity building through NPST and NISHTHA, infrastructure investments in connectivity/devices, federal coordination with performance-linked funding, and targeted monitoring through community connections and SEDG-focused audits (Amin, Sultana, Begum, & Tumung, 2025).

Findings and suggestions

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a shift towards a child-centric and holistic education system through experiential learning, early exposure to practical competencies and flexible learning pathways. There is the need to integrate work-oriented learning into the school system and this has

vigorous potential to attract better learning outcomes and employability. But, some impediments like a shortage of trained teachers, digital divide in rural and urban areas and differential implementation capacity among states may impair its efficacy, the study found. Given these findings, a push for more public sector investment flows towards bolstering infrastructure and resources along with mass teacher training and recruitment so that quality delivery can be ensured is warranted. This is a critical task, as the massive disparity in connectivity and devices needs to be reduced- bringing millions of kids into balanced learning opportunities through resources. Support for vulnerable populations, improved coordination between Union and State Governments and immediate monitoring mechanisms are also required. Linking the vocational education system to industry and initiatives for skill development will strengthen the capacity of NEP 2020 to lead to concrete educational as well as employment-oriented outcomes.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a visionary blueprint for transforming India's education system into a child rights-centric, equitable, and skill-oriented ecosystem that effectively addresses the long-existing gaps in access and quality of education, as well as in related employability issues amidst entrenched social and regional inequalities. Through child-centered pedagogies like experiential learning, early vocational path integrated from Class 6, flexible pathways, and institutional bolsters such as NPTS and PARAKH, NEP complies with constitutional mandates (Articles 21A, 39(f)) and UN SDGs, empowering SEDGs and fostering social mobility for over 250 million learners poised for driving India's demographic dividend by 2040. However, as evidenced, implementation barriers such as teacher shortages of over 1 million, digital divides among 60% of rural households, states disparities, and funding below 6% GDP threaten equity realization, especially for marginalized vocational access. The success of the NEP therefore depends on strong governance, federal funding linked to performance, massive capacity building through NISHTHA, equity in infrastructure, and vigilant monitoring of SEDG. In sum, while NEP 2020 shows strong promises in inclusiveness of skill development and child rights advancement, a sustained multi-stakeholder commitment to overcoming these hurdles is imperative for equitable outcomes and India's knowledge economy aspirations. Future research should use longitudinal studies to assess learning outcomes, dropout reduction and employability impacts for informed policy refinement.

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