

## Addressing Implementation Challenges in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) under NEP 2020: Insights from Educational Practices and the Role of Balvatikas

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### Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a vital role in the holistic development of children and serves as the foundation for lifelong learning. Quality ECCE programmes support children's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development through play-based and child-centred approaches. Recognizing its significance, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places strong emphasis on ECCE. NEP 2020 advocates strengthening early learning through improved curriculum design, innovative pedagogical practices, better infrastructure, and enhanced community participation. The policy's 5+3+3+4 curricular structure acknowledges the foundational stage as critical for learning and development, ECCE programmes also foster early language, literacy, and numeracy skills along with socio-emotional competence, collaboration, moral values, and creativity through activity-based learning, thereby preparing children for school readiness and lifelong learning. In this context, initiatives such as Balvatikas have been introduced to strengthen the preparatory stage by providing structured, child-centred, and activity-based learning experiences before Grade 1. However, despite these progressive measures, the effective implementation of ECCE under NEP 2020 faces various challenges. Therefore, the present paper examines the implementation challenges of ECCE under NEP 2020, draws insights from existing educational practices, and explores the emerging role of Balvatikas in strengthening the foundational stage of education in India.

**Keywords:** Implementation, Challenges, ECCE, NEP 2020, Educational Practices, Balvatikas

### 1. Introduction

Education is an ever-changing process. As society's needs evolve throughout time, so does it. This system's adjustments are both inevitable and crucial as development is possible when people are ready to adapt. The first education policy of the twenty-first century, the National Education Policy 2020, attempts to address our nation's numerous expanding developmental imperatives. This policy suggests updating and changing every facet of the educational system, including its rules and governance, to establish a new system that builds on India's customs and value systems while being in line with the aspirational aims of 21st-century education, especially SDG4. The National Education Policy places special focus on each student's development of their creative potential individual. It is predicated on the idea that education must foster social, ethical, and emotional skills and dispositions in addition to cognitive abilities, including the "foundational capacities" of literacy and numeracy as well as "higher-order" cognitive abilities like critical thinking and problem solving. According to this strategy, a new pedagogical and curricular restructure of 5+3+3+4 spanning ages 3-18 replace the 10+2 framework in school instruction. Since Class 1 starts at age 6, children in the 3-6 age range are currently not covered by the 10+2 framework. A solid foundation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) starting at age 3 is also incorporated in the new 5+3+3+4 framework, which aims to promote greater overall learning, development, and welfare. (Part I, NEP 2020)

#### 1.1 Initiatives of NEP 2020 to rejuvenate early years of education

- a) Introduction of new school structure of 5+3+3+4 which aims for a new pedagogical and curricular restructure covering age group 3-18 and also replacing 10+2 framework in school instruction. Thus providing a solid foundation to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) starting at age 3 and also a part of 5+3+3+4 framework, which aims to promote greater overall learning, development, and welfare.
- b) NEP 2020 focuses on Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). The ability to read and write, and do basic operations with numbers, is an essential foundation and a vital precondition for all subsequent schooling and lifetime learning. Achieving universal basic reading and numeracy in elementary school by 2025 will be the education system's top aim.
- c) Play based learning: Play is essential for all children from birth to age eight (NAEYC, 2020), fosters learning in an enjoyable way that helps kids develop their verbal, cognitive, and social skills in addition to acquiring trans-disciplinary subject and practicing self-regulation expertise (Kaur, 2023). According to Yogman et al. (2018) Play both inside and outdoors, is often planned in a variety of ways to provide young children with ongoing chances to improve their peer connections, language, symbolic and imaginative thinking, physical development, and problem-solving abilities. Play-based learning is a major focus in the preparatory sessions, helping kids builds early reading and numeracy skills as well as mental, psychological, and physical abilities. In order to guarantee that every youngster is prepared for school, a three-month play-based "school preparation module" was implemented for all first-graders. NCERT and SCERTs provide exercises and workbooks centered on learning alphabets, sounds, words, colors, shapes, and numbers that include working with peers and parents.
- d) Curriculum and Pedagogy: National Education Policy (2020) has brought various reforms in the curriculum and pedagogy that aims to transform India's Education system from rote learning to holistic and competency based learning. NEP 2020 replaces the traditional 10+2 structure with 5+3+3+4 design which consists of 4 stages:
  - Foundational Stage (5 years): consists of Balvatika and Grades 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>
  - Preparatory Stage (3 years): consists of Grades 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>
  - Middle Stage (3 years): consists of Grades 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>
  - Secondary Stage (4 years): consists of Grades 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>
- e) Holistic Development: The New Education Policy 2020 states that pedagogy must alter to make education more immersive, comprehensive, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centered, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, entertaining. To assist children develop all aspects of themselves and their skills, the curriculum must include basic arts, crafts, humanities, games, sports, fitness, languages, literature, culture, and values in addition to science and arithmetic. Students' education will become more thorough, useful, and fulfilling as a result (Saxena, 2024). According to the New Education Policy 2020, academic performance by itself does not guarantee success in life. Schools should carefully consider the moral, emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of students' growth (Shilpa & Sharma 2025). The primary objective of curriculum and pedagogy reform at all levels is to shift the educational system away from the dominant culture of memorization and toward real comprehension and learning.

### 1.2 Role of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Child Development in the Context of NEP 2020

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a significant role in the holistic development of children and serves as the foundation for lifelong learning. Research indicates that high-quality ECCE programmes enhance children's intellectual, social, and emotional development, thereby generating long-term benefits for both individuals and society (Behra & Acharya, 2024). Such programmes generally adopt play-based and child-centred approaches that support children's overall growth and development. From a policy perspective, the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes ECCE as the foundation of the education system and recognizes the importance of early childhood in shaping future learning outcomes. Ratnoo (2020) observed that the policy represents a major step toward transforming India's education system by strengthening early childhood education through improved curriculum design, teaching methodologies, infrastructure, and community engagement via Anganwadi centres. Similarly, Kanujiya and Jaiswal (2025) describe NEP 2020 as a transformative reform that highlights the importance of ECCE and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN). The restructuring of the education system into the 5+3+3+4 framework acknowledges the early years as the cornerstone of lifelong learning. Furthermore, the policy notes that more than 85% of brain development occurs before the age of six, making early stimulation, care, and learning experiences essential for cognitive and socio-emotional growth.

Study by Basu and Santra (2023) found that ECCE promotes collaboration, teamwork, moral values, ethical behaviour, and social skills among young children. In addition, it facilitates the development of early language, literacy, and numeracy skills along with socio-emotional competence, cultural and artistic expression, and cognitive, physical, and motor development. ECCE programmes therefore play an essential role in preparing children for school readiness and lifelong learning through activity-based and play-oriented approaches (Kalavathi & Fathima, 2023). Recent initiatives under NEP 2020, such as **Balvatika**, further strengthen early childhood education in India. Devi et al. (2025) reported that Balvatikas provide preparatory classes before Grade 1 and promote child-centred and activity-based learning opportunities that enhance children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

### 1.3 Reformative Initiatives for ECCE

A number of historic laws and initiatives designed to promote young children's holistic development have influenced the evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India. These programs integrate nutrition, health, and education to create a solid basis for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

1. **The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP):** India's approach to early education has undergone a paradigm shift with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It integrates pre-primary and early primary education to define the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8 years) of education into a cohesive system. In addition to introducing bilingual education with an emphasis on the mother tongue or home language in the early years, the policy encourages play-based, activity-oriented, and experiential learning. It emphasizes holistic development, which includes socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, and it advocates for improving teacher preparation and ECCE capacity building. In order to maintain continuity between home and school learning, NEP 2020 also places a strong emphasis on community and family participation. This strategy addresses the many linguistic and cultural settings of the nation while bringing India's ECCE framework into line with international best practices.
2. **The National Curriculum Framework 2022 for Foundational Stage:** The National Curriculum Framework 2022 for Foundational Stage offers several opportunities to improve foundational stage education. The National Curriculum Framework 2022 for Foundational Stage is found to be a significant development in early childhood education. Its focus on learner-centric methods, inclusion, and holistic development through play-based learning, multilingualism, and socio-emotional development offers enormous potential to improve educational results. However, overcoming obstacles like budget limitations and capacity building requirements is essential to the NCF's successful implementation. Going ahead, coordinated actions by legislators to achieve the NCF-FS's goal of egalitarian, inclusive, and high-quality early childhood education, educators and stakeholders are crucial. (Salam, 2022)
3. **Additional Complementary Projects:** ECCE in India is indirectly supported by a number of government efforts in addition to significant policies. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme is one of the initiatives of GOI to improve school attendance and to provide nutritional support to children's health and preparedness for school. Through enrichment programs, the Bal Bhavan and Early Learning Centers promote cultural and creative growth. Even at the basic level, the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan guarantees equal access, retention, and quality in education. Nutritional security for children under six is addressed by the Poshan Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission), which links learning results, nutrition, and health. When taken as a whole, these policies and initiatives provide a thorough framework for early childhood care and education in India, guaranteeing that every youngster gets the support, education, and nutrition they require to flourish in life (SK, 2025).

### 2. Role of Balvatika in promoting ECCE

Balvatika is the foundational stage of education, with an emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children between the ages of three and six. Before they start first grade, it gets them ready linguistically, socially, and intellectually. The role of Balvatika is explained as under:

- a) **Universal ECCE Access:** NEP 2020 requires all children to receive high-quality ECCE by 2025, with Balvatika serving as the entrance point. By guaranteeing that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have similar preparation, this lessens disparities.
- b) **Pedagogy Based on Play:** Storytelling, riddles, music, painting, and outdoor play are all examples of activity-driven learning. It promotes creativity, inquiry, and critical thinking rather than mindless memorization.
- c) **Multilingual Basis:** In order to promote improved comprehension and cultural grounding, instruction in the mother tongue or local language is suggested. Develops language adaptability for multilingual schooling in the future.
- d) **Preparatory Course Prior to First Grade:** Pre-literacy and pre-numeracy abilities are the main emphasis of a one-year Balvatika curriculum (age 5+) that serves as a school readiness course makes the transition to formal education easier.
- e) **Including the 5+3+3+4 Structure:** Grades 1-2 plus Balvatika (ages 3-6) equals Foundational Stage (5 years). Brings India's educational system into compliance with global best standards for early childhood education.
- f) **Teacher Training:** NEP provides Balvatika instructors with ECCE pedagogy and promotes ongoing professional development. Guarantees child-centered methods and high-quality delivery.

### 3. Challenges in Implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education at Foundational Stage

The gap between urban and rural regions is one of the many obstacles that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) implementation still faces. While rural locations suffer with inadequate facilities, less educated workers, and uneven support systems, urban areas frequently benefit from superior infrastructure, qualified education, and access to digital resources. Significant challenges are also presented by the digital divide and gaps in infrastructure. Teaching and learning options are limited in many rural and underprivileged areas due to a lack of dependable energy, internet access, and digital gadgets.

Additionally, traditional schooling paradigms that promote rote learning over play-based and experiential approaches are the source of opposition to pedagogical reforms. Teachers, parents, and administrators who are unfamiliar with or doubtful about contemporary ECCE practices are frequently the source of this opposition. Last but not least, all ECCE programs urgently require quality assurance, standardization, and monitoring. Without defined criteria and frequent assessments, the quality of education remains variable, underlining the requirement of a uniform, well-regulated approach to basic learning (Bhoi and Patra 2025).

However, Behra and Acharya (2024) also highlight challenges in the Indian context, particularly inadequate teacher training and the need for greater investment in child-centred pedagogical practices. The study further notes disparities in access and quality of ECCE services for children belonging to different family backgrounds, especially those from working households.

In addition, Kalavathi and Fathima (2023) emphasize the need for universal access to ECCE so that every child enters primary school with adequate school readiness skills. The authors advocate a redesigned curriculum for children aged 3–8 years that focuses on exploration, play-based learning, and multilingual development. The implementation of ECCE programmes through Anganwadi centres and schools is expected to support children's overall health, nutrition, and early learning experiences.

Despite these progressive initiatives, several challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of ECCE programmes in India. Devi et al. (2025) identified major constraints such as inadequate teacher training, lack of infrastructure, uneven quality across states, and limited parental awareness in Balvatikas functioning in J&K. Similarly, Ganguly (2024) noted that although NEP 2020 offers a strong framework for improving ECCE in India, effective implementation is necessary to achieve better learning outcomes for children and to strengthen it.

Within the framework of the National Education Policy 2020, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), with special reference to Balvatikas, faces several challenges that hinder the achievement of key objectives of foundational education in India. These challenges include:

- i. **Infrastructure and Accessibility Issues:** A large percentage of India's rural and ECCE centers are inaccessible to underprivileged groups (Mughkali & Joseph 2025).
- ii. **Teacher Training and Workforce Development:** Insufficiently qualified ECCE teachers continue to be a major problem. Many ECCE centres such as Anganwadi are facing lack of staff and the educational training that NEP 2020 recommends. Effective implementation is hampered by a heavy workload, insufficient compensation, and poor employee engagement (Mughkali & Joseph 2025).
- iii. **Financial Restrictions & Inadequate funding for ECCE under NEP 2020:** Although the NEP suggests allocating 6% of GDP to education, the real amount is still less than this goal. Resource provision, capacity building, and ECCE center expansion are all hampered by financial limitations (Mughkali & Joseph 2025).
- iv. **Hiring Teachers:** The lack of hiring for foundational level instructors is a significant obstacle. The effectiveness of the policy is in jeopardy in the absence of trained instructors. The workforce of teachers nowadays, lacks the specific abilities needed for early childhood pedagogy because they were mostly trained for primary and upper-primary education (Baragde, 2025).
- v. **Curriculum Development:** It is essential to create an approved curriculum that corresponds with children's developmental phases. Although the NIPUN Bharat program offers recommendations, extensive adaption and teacher training are necessary to ensure consistent implementation. The creation of an official and significant milestone under NEP 2020 is the LKG and UKG syllabi. In developing a curriculum that is in line with the ideas of play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based learning, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has taken the initiative (NCERT, 2022). Although the targets of NIPUN Bharat Mission, which seeks to provide basic reading and numeracy for every child by Grade 3, are in line with this new curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2021) and Pilot initiatives have started in states like Kerala and Karnataka, but significant capacity building is needed for a countrywide rollout (NCTE,2022) (Baragde,2025).
- vi. **Ratio of Teachers to Students:** It may be challenging to logistically meet the policy's required teacher-to-student ratios, especially in densely populated areas (Malik and Hasan, 2024).

#### 4. Prospects ahead in Early Childhood Care and Education ( ECCE)

The future of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is currently undergoing a global paradigm shift, transitioning from a "childcare" model to a "foundational learning" model. Guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 and India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the prospects ahead focus on universal access, professionalization of the workforce, and pedagogical innovation. The following are the key prospects ahead in ECCE, supported by recent research and policy frameworks:

##### a) Universalization of Access and "School Readiness"

The primary prospect is ensuring that every child has access to at least one year of free, quality pre-primary education.

- **Global Context:** According to the UNESCO-UNICEF Global Report (2024), while access has improved, nearly 60% of children in low-income countries still lack ECCE opportunities. The prospect involves scaling "Balvatikas" (preparatory classes) to ensure children are school-ready by age 6 (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024).
- **NEP 2020 Alignment:** India aims for universal access to ECCE by 2030 through a four-pronged infrastructure model: stand-alone Anganwadis, Anganwadis co-located with primary schools, pre-primary sections in existing schools, and stand-alone preschools (Ministry of Education, 2020, Para 1.2).

##### b) Transition to Play-Based and Discovery-Based Pedagogy

The "prospect ahead" involves moving away from rote learning toward a flexible, multi-level curriculum.

- **Pedagogical Framework:** The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022) emphasizes "Panchakosha" (the five-fold development) and play-based learning. This aligns with global research suggesting that play-based instruction in the early years is 30% more effective in fostering creativity and problem-solving (NCERT, 2022; eskilld, 2025).
- **Literacy and Numeracy:** The NIPUN Bharat Mission sets a clear target: achieving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) for every child by the end of Grade 3 by 2026-27 (Ministry of Education, 2021).

##### c) Professionalization and Capacity Building of Educators

A significant prospect is the transformation of the ECCE workforce from "caregivers" to "specialized educators."

- **Training Mandates:** NEP 2020 mandates a 6-month certificate program for Anganwadi workers with 10+2 qualifications and a one-year diploma for those with lower qualifications.
- **Global Demand:** The world needs an additional 6 million pre-primary educators by 2030 to meet SDG targets (UNESCO, 2024). This indicates a massive professional opportunity for trained ECCE specialists.

##### d) Integration of Technology and Digital Literacy

While screen time is often debated, the prospect ahead involves using technology to assist educators and monitor development.

- Hybrid Learning: The use of digital tools like the DIKSHA platform for teacher training and the Poshan Tracker for monitoring child health and growth milestones represents the future of data-driven ECCE (Ministry of WCD, 2023).
- Early Digital Skills: Emerging global trends suggest that introducing "active" digital engagement (rather than passive consumption) helps build 21st-century digital resilience (OECD, 2025).

**e) Multi-Sectoral and Holistic Care**

ECCE is increasingly viewed as an integrated "ecosystem" rather than just a school system.

- Nurturing Care Framework: Future prospects involve the convergence of Health, Nutrition, and Education. Programs like Mission Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0 reflect this trend, where cognitive stimulation is paired with nutritional security to support brain development, 85% of which occurs before age 6 (UNICEF, 2021).
- Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL): There is an increasing focus on "trauma-informed practices" and mental well-being in early childhood to build lifelong resilience (Rasmussen University, 2020).

**f) Inclusive and Mother-Tongue Instruction**

The prospect of "equity" is being addressed through linguistic inclusion.

- Multilingualism: NEP 2020 (Para 4.11) and global evidence emphasize that the medium of instruction in early years should be the mother tongue/home language to ensure better cognitive acquisition and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2024).

**5. Suggestions for Better Implementation of ECCE in Foundational Stage of Learning**

- Strengthening ECCE through clear standards and convergence:** ECCE needs a common set of quality standards for curriculum, infrastructure, play materials, health and nutrition links, and assessment across Anganwadi centres, Balvatikas, and private preschools. This will ensure that children have similar experiences regardless of their provider. The National ECCE Policy (2013) and NEP 2020 both support a holistic, play-based approach that integrates health, nutrition, care, and early learning. This can be put into practice through state ECCE quality frameworks and simple monitoring tools for frontline workers.
- Specialized, continuous training for Anganwadi and preschool teachers:** Early childhood educators are often the first formal contact children have with education. It is crucial that they have a solid understanding of child development, inclusive practices, and play-based teaching methods. NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 stress the need to professionalize this workforce through standard pre-service and in-service training, certification programs (such as 6-month or 1-year ECCE courses), and ongoing professional development offered through Cluster Resource Centres and online platforms.
- Strengthening play-based Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK):** Many pre-primary classrooms still rely on rote teaching, even though policies focus on play and exploration. Teacher training should aim to help educators connect curriculum goals in literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and motor skills with real play experiences. These can include story-based tasks, guided games, and activities that use local materials, all while being culturally and linguistically relevant.
- Digital tools, mentoring, and ongoing CPD:** Regular, practice-based professional development supported by mobile phones, DIKSHA, and television can reach educators in remote areas. This will provide training modules on NCF-FS, NIPUN Bharat, inclusive practices, and formative assessment. Mentoring by trained resource persons, classroom observations, and feedback loops can help carry new strategies into everyday ECCE practice.
- Interactive digital content with safeguards:** Platforms such as DIKSHA already offer content aligned with foundational learning. Expanding multilingual, low-text, play-rich digital content such as stories, animations, and games can make abstract concepts more concrete for young children, especially when used in short, supervised sessions. At the same time, guidelines are necessary to prevent excessive screen time and to ensure that technology supports, rather than replaces, hands-on play and social interaction.
- Blended learning and parental engagement:** Blended models that mix home-based activities (like worksheets, SMS, radio, and community meetings) with centre-based play sessions can increase learning time and involve parents as co-educators. However, these must consider the digital divide and low literacy levels in many communities. NEP 2020's focus on community and family participation can be implemented through simple parenting modules, mother-child sessions, and resource kits in local languages for caregivers.
- Focusing on inclusion and equity in the foundational stage:** Implementation should prioritize children from rural, tribal, migrant, and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as children with disabilities. This includes ensuring accessible infrastructure, early identification, suitable play materials, and flexible schedules. Strengthening Anganwadi's and Balvatikas in these areas, along with collaboration with Poshan Abhiyaan and health services, can tackle learning, nutrition, and health issues in the foundational stage.

**6. Conclusions**

An important step in raising educational standards in India is the NEP 2020's emphasis on early childhood education. The strategy aims to give all children the skills they need by emphasizing the foundational period and combining early learning with primary school and the information necessary for them to succeed in school and beyond. However, achieving this goal will need coordinated efforts to address the issues of equal access, teacher preparation, and infrastructure.

In order to guarantee that the policy's lofty goals for early childhood education translate into significant change on the ground, politicians, educators, and communities must collaborate as India moves forward with NEP 2020 implementation. Investing in the early years, India can create a more robust and inclusive educational system that promotes each child's whole development.

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