

# A CASE OF CONFUSED THINKING: ON DRAFT NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The [draft National Education Policy](#) (NEP) 2019 recommends a restructuring of school years and the curriculum, in a wide-ranging manner. If properly implemented, many of the suggested changes may help education. These include flexibility and wider scope at the secondary level, space for moral reasoning, re-emphasis on the true spirit of the three language formula, a focus on the core concepts and key ideas in subjects, vocational courses, and also a focus of assessment on understanding. However, the draft NEP also recommends much that may have just the opposite effect. These are, for example, 15 subjects/courses at the upper primary level, three languages in early childhood education, and confusing statements on a number of curricular issues. The curriculum the draft NEP suggests at the upper primary level has started looking like a laundry list, perhaps because of a lack of a coherent vision and the curricular thinking it adopts.

The policy envisions an “India centred education system that contributes directly to transforming our nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society”. The proclaimed “India centred-ness” of education is limited to recommendations on Indian languages and a mention of Indian knowledge systems. The operational vision is that of a “knowledge society”, almost entirely contained in UNESCO-preached ‘21st century skills’. The democratic ideal is neither mentioned nor used in articulating the aims of education or curricular recommendation, though democratic values are mentioned in the list of key “skills” that are to be integrated in subjects.

The vision of a knowledge society directly leads to the objectives of curricular transformation “in order to minimise rote learning and instead encourage holistic development and 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, scientific temper, communication, collaboration, multilingualism, problem solving, ethics, social responsibility, and digital literacy”. The most important and educationally worthwhile term is “skill” and everything has to fit in within that; even ethics and social responsibility.

“The goal”, according to the draft policy, “will be to create holistic and complete individuals equipped with key 21st century skills”. This makes it quite clear what the definition of “holistic and complete individuals” means. After a host of curricular recommendations which includes new subjects/courses comes another statement which may sound like an articulation of curricular objectives or aims of education. Under the heading “Curricular integration of essential subjects and skills”, it says: “certain subjects and skills should be learned by all students in order to become good, successful, innovative, adaptable, and productive human beings in today’s rapidly-changing world. In addition to proficiency in languages, these skills include: scientific temper; sense of aesthetics and art; languages; communication; ethical reasoning; digital literacy; knowledge of India; and knowledge of critical issues facing local communities, States, the country, and the world”.

The broad goals are to send out “good, successful, innovative, adaptable, and productive human beings”; not a critical, democratic citizen who may want to change the situation rather than adapting to it. The list of eight “skills” (*sic*) is supposed to “create” such individuals. And to enable such an aim, it is no wonder that everything is a “skill” which includes among others a “sense of aesthetics”, “ethical reasoning”, “compassion” and “curiosity”. The phrase “Evidence-based and scientific thinking” is used together everywhere implying that there can be “scientific thinking” which is not evidence based. The policy assumes that “evidence-based and scientific

thinking... will lead naturally to rational, ethical, and compassionate individuals". I wonder how "evidence based" this claim itself happens to be. How scientific thinking will develop "compassion" is beyond one's understanding. Further, it is interesting that "evidence-based and scientific thinking" is supposed to help create an ethical, rational, and compassionate individual but not a "logical and problem solving" individual as they are listed separately as "skills". I wonder what part of logical and problem-solving abilities remain outside evidence-based, scientific and rational thinking.

The comments made above may be seen as a case of nit-picking by some. However, a policy document is read and interpreted at many levels and influences educational discourse. A document which places much emphasis on clarity of understanding and critical thinking cannot itself afford to fail in meeting the same standards. Shoddiness of thinking at the national level does not encourage hope of proper interpretation and implementation of the policy. This is already reflected in some policy recommendations. Here are a few such examples.

The draft NEP rightly criticises private pre-schools for being a downward extension of primary school and of there being formal teaching in them. But it goes on to recommend preparing children for primary by prescribing learning the alphabets of and reading in three languages (for 3-6-year olds). All this in the name of "enhanced (*sic*) language learning abilities" of young children. Further the draft policy mistakes "language acquisition when children are immersed in more than one languages" with a "language teaching" situation where immersion is impossible in three languages. It then extends it unjustifiably to a learning of three scripts. It prescribes teaching script and reading in three languages to three-year-old children, but writing is supposed to be taught to six-year-old children. It also wants to introduce "some textbooks" only at age eight. One wonders why there is a three year gap between teaching reading and writing. If script and reading are already taught, then why withhold textbooks till age eight?

Here is another example of similar and confused thinking. The draft policy stipulates that the "mandated contents in the curriculum will be reduced... to its core, focussing on key concepts and essential ideas". This is to "yield more space for discussion and nuanced understanding, analysis, and application of key concepts". But it goes on to block more than the space vacated by prescribing six new laundry-list subjects/courses in addition to the existing eight. Some of these new courses such as "critical issues" and "moral reasoning" can be taught in a much better way in a revised curriculum of social studies as the context for both is society. Social studies needs more space in the upper primary curriculum. The subject has to be taught in such a manner that it connects with society and can be a very good way of introducing critical issues and moral thinking. Abstract moral reasoning is likely to have the same fate as so-called "moral science" that is taught in many schools. Similarly, "Indian classical language" and "Indian languages" can constitute a single rich subject rather than being split into two courses.

Identifying key concepts and essential ideas are a matter of rational curricular decision making; not listing ideas as they come to one's mind. The absence of discussion on socio-political life seems to be another casualty in the emphasis on a knowledge society and 21st century skills. Social studies seems to be missing entirely as it has been mentioned once and then left out of the entire discussion on curriculum. In the end, the vision of the draft NEP rests on UNESCO declarations and reports rather than the Indian Constitution and development of democracy in this country; this in spite of wanting to make education India-centred. Thus, in the suggested curriculum changes, socio-political life is almost invisible.

All this goes to show that the draft NEP 2019 itself lacks the very abilities it emphasises, namely critical thinking and deeper understanding. It is a badly written document which hides behind a plethora of terms that are half-understood and clubbed under the overarching master concept of "skill". In short, the policy lacks depth and loses focus of the richness of secular democratic

ideals by aiming for 21st century skills.

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