

Flexibility and Choice

Imagining the Implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 for the Secondary Stage

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Abstract

The interstate migration of construction workers has a significant impact on the education of their children. Their children are often deprived of educational facilities due to the interplay of several social and economic push factors. The present research is a case study of an on-site school serving migrant workers' children and aims to know the educational status of migrant workers' children and understand their educational problems. The qualitative data reveals several barriers in the educational path of migrant workers' children such as low economic status of workers, safety concerns related to sending children to far off schools in migrated places, language barriers in school, lack of awareness about free education and other benefits provided in government schools and impoverished site school.

Keywords: School education, migrant workers' children, on-site schools.

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes some fundamental shifts in school education, including restructuring school education into a 5+3+3+4 structure, with the last stage, comprising Classes 9 to 12, viewed as a single stage.

Another shift the Policy posits, particularly in the secondary stage, is that students will be empowered through “increased flexibility and choice of subjects to study, particularly in secondary school – including subjects in physical education, the arts and crafts, and vocational skills – so that they can design their own paths of study and life plans. Holistic development and a wide choice of subjects and courses year to year will be the new distinguishing feature of secondary school education. There will be no hard separation among ‘curricular’, ‘extracurricular’, or

‘co-curricular’ subjects, among ‘arts’, ‘humanities’, and ‘sciences’, or between ‘vocational’ or ‘academic’ streams. Subjects such as physical education, the arts and crafts, and vocational skills, in addition to science, humanities, and mathematics, will be incorporated throughout the school curriculum, with a consideration for what is interesting and safe at each age” (GoI 2020, Para 4.9)

Further, “Each of the four stages of school education, in accordance with what may be possible in different regions, may consider moving towards a semester or any other system that allows the inclusion of shorter modules, or courses that are taught on alternate days, in order to allow an exposure to more subjects and enable greater flexibility. States may look into innovative methods to achieve these aims of greater flexibility and exposure to and enjoyment of

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a wider range of subjects, including across the arts, sciences, humanities, languages, sports, and vocational subjects” (GoI 2020, Para 4.10)

While we have to wait for the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2021 to be developed by NCERT to understand how these details will be operationalised, this paper attempts to imagine how these provisions will be actualised in the secondary stage.

Imagining the secondary stage

This section attempts to elaborate on certain key aspects of the secondary stage, based on the Policy but making some assumptions, before proposing a framework to operationalise the secondary stage.

Operationalising flexibility and choice

The underlying rationale of the Policy related to student flexibility and choice is that each student must get the opportunity to experience a variety of subjects and participate in a variety of learning experiences so that their later choices related to study and career are informed and personal, as opposed to being driven by what is socially popular or by their parents’ aspirations.

In a sense, the Policy allows for each student to take charge of their learning and create their own curriculum within the larger framework of the school curriculum. To this end, the Policy gives equal status to all subjects and emphasises that the hard barriers between science, arts, humanities and vocational streams, and between curricular and the so-called co-/extra-curricular areas must be removed.

At the same time, the Policy speaks of ‘essential subjects, skills and capacities’, while catering for the ‘large amount of flexibility in choosing their individual curricula’. The operationalisation of flexibility and choice extends to when to take Board examinations and what level to take them at. While there are several policy actions related to assessment reforms, one that indicates

additional flexibility and choice is offering assessments in all subjects at two levels – standard and higher – beginning with mathematics. (GoI 2020, Para 4.38)

It is important to consider the implications for a framework that operationalises this flexibility and choice. First, there has to be some method for enabling these, since choice cannot be completely random; certain essential components must circumscribe this framework (as also indicated by the ‘essentials’ mentioned in the Policy). Second, the flexibility and choice must extend across all subjects – it cannot be seen as applicable only to ‘electives’. In fact, the concept of electives, in some sense, contradicts the conception of the Policy. An elective is optional, not compulsory – it is something additional to the compulsory subjects. However, who is to determine which subject is essential? If a student is passionate about music, would that be an essential subject or an elective for that student?

At this point, it is also important to consider that the content of subjects is not an end in itself. It is acquisition of the associated competencies that is the objective of learning. With this as an underlying principle, it does not matter what subject one is studying as long as at the end of the stipulated time period, the desired competencies have been attained. This principle also enables the shift from the present stress of rote learning to the ‘real understanding’ referred to in the Policy as well as the ability of ‘learning how to learn’ (GoI 2020, Para 4.4). For example, if a desired competency is developing a scientific attitude, a variety of subject areas can help the student attain this competency, automatically enabling choice.

Competency-based learning and education

An implication of making the shift from ‘learning content’ to ‘developing capacities associated with each subject’ is that competencies will form the core of teaching-learning. The Policy recognises this and indicates competency-based learning and

education as the need of the hour (GoI 2020, Paras 4.6, 4.34). It assigns the responsibility for developing standards to a new institute that is to be set up – the Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development (PARAKH) (GoI 2020, Para 4.41). These standards are expected to indicate the attainment of knowledge, skills and values associated with each developmental stage for each subject, expressed as competencies. Thus, each standard must be obtained, through its associated competencies. This, in turn, would imply that each student must attain these standards at the end of a given period, while allowing them flexibility and choice to attain the associated competencies at their own pace.

For example, if one of the standards for geometry for Classes 9-12 is *specify locations and describe spatial relationships using coordinate geometry and other representational systems*, associated competencies are: (i) *use Cartesian coordinates and other coordinate systems, such as navigational, polar, or spherical systems, to analyse geometric situations; and (ii) investigate conjectures and solve problems involving two- and three-dimensional objects represented with Cartesian coordinates* (NCTM, 2000). Similarly, if the standard associated with wave characteristics for Classes 9-12 is that students must know that *waves (mechanical and electromagnetic) are described by their wavelength, amplitude, frequency, and speed*, then associated competencies are that students must (i) *describe specific mechanical waves (for example, on a demonstration spring, on the ocean) in terms of wavelength, amplitude, frequency, and speed; (ii) identify everyday examples of transverse and compression (longitudinal) waves; and (iii) compare and contrast transverse and compression (longitudinal) waves in terms of wavelength, amplitude, and frequency* (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). A student would be required to attain the standards by the end of the secondary stage. This would

imply a student could choose to study courses that would help acquire these standards at any point during the secondary stage. While assuring the progression of concept development, the student would not have to necessarily study a course at a fixed time. For example, the student could choose to do more mathematics courses before physics; or could explore languages towards the end of the stage while focussing on say music in the earlier stage. Of course, this would require a great deal of interaction between the student and teachers or counsellors, to ensure appropriate progression of conceptual development while ensuring that essential areas are covered.

Hence, the standards and associated competencies must make clear the expectations from learners across Class 9-12. They must also help identify prerequisites related to prior knowledge. Hence, standards should be expressed in terms of a continuum, each building on the previous one and becoming increasingly more complex.

While these examples are rooted in the subject, it is critical that standards include all domains of learning. Thus, *generate new questions that can be investigated in the laboratory or field; distinguish between scientific explanations that are regarded as current scientific consensus and the emerging questions that active researchers investigate; and evaluate the future career and occupational prospects of science fields* are equally critical (Michigan Department of Education, 2015).

At the same time, it should not be mandatory that all these competencies are assessed in the 'traditional' manner – the danger of tailoring teaching to what can be tested traditionally is well known to all. Hence, competencies that are not directly observable (for example, from the affective domain or non-content related competencies from the cognitive domain) must be given equal importance. This can be enabled through the holistic 360-degree multidimensional progress card that will include a range of competencies, some of

which can be assessed by peers, by self, and through activities that are different from the traditional paper-pencil format (GoI 2020, Para 4.35). With this approach, it can be assured that all competencies are of equal importance, and those that are rooted in the content or can be assessed through paper and pencil are not given priority.

Enabling flexibility and choice

While a great deal of effort will be required to both imagine and to enable transition to the kind of offerings available to students in the secondary stage, it may be useful to identify some key elements the stage must have.

The first aspect that must be considered is that the secondary stage from Classes 9-12 is to be treated as a single stage. The implication is that a credit-based system must be considered, wherein students are required to complete a certain number of credits by the end of the secondary stage. Each course will be assigned credits, and the total number of credits to be acquired by the end of the stage will be specified. Given that certain subjects are essential, (GoI 2020, Paras 4.23 to 4.29) the requisite number of credits would be assigned to these, and all students will be required to definitely attain these credits by the end of the secondary stage. In addition to these, students would have to acquire a minimum number of credits across other subjects – more details are available in the next sub-section.

Even within the essential subjects, students would have the option of studying the subject at two levels, starting with mathematics but extending to all subjects eventually (GoI 2020, Para 4.38). However, one thing must be clear – all students must be assessed for the purpose of certification (through Board examinations) on the curriculum they have studied. Thus, in alignment with other Boards, students should be assessed on the core curriculum that all students must study, or be given the option to study an advanced/enhanced/supplemental – the name can vary – curriculum. The credits each carry will vary,

and the school leaving certificate will indicate the accumulated credits for each subject.

At this point, it is important to reiterate that there must be certain prerequisites for a student to choose a subject. For example, given the close connect between mathematics and physics, it would not make sense for a student to opt for physics without studying mathematics. Also, to study a subject, students must have been exposed to the fundamentals in earlier years. This aligns with the Policy action requiring exposure to a large number of subjects throughout schooling (GoI 2020, Para 4.10).

Framework to bring it all together

Based on the above discussion, the following key features will characterise this imagined secondary stage.

1. Comprehensive standards for each subject, including vocational subjects, arts, physical education, etc. that indicate competencies in the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains.
2. Categories of subjects from which all students must choose. As opposed to streams, these categories will include all areas of study in the curriculum, thus ensuring that all students get exposure to some courses in each area. Thus, students would have to choose courses from vocational, mathematics, science, language, arts, humanities, social science or any other category that may emerge.
3. Credits will be assigned to courses, with each student required to attain a minimum number of credits in each area of study to obtain certification. These credits have to be completed by the end of the secondary stage.
4. Since it is unrealistic for schools to offer a very large number of courses, students can opt to take courses that are not offered in their school through private means or through NIOS, etc. Organisations/institutes like the National Science Center, Central and State Museums, Kala Akademis, National Book Trust, etc. could also develop courses for students

with appropriate credit structures. The Boards would have to cater for private students or count credits taken through an organisation/institute other than the school.

5. Students can opt for the core or advanced (or any other suitable word) in each of the subjects. However, there must be a minimum number of courses that they must take for the advanced level in subjects of their choice (these must include vocational courses and could range from mathematics, languages, sciences, etc. to arts, music, dance, physical education, etc.).

It is important to point out that this change will take time. Even after NCERT brings out the NCFSE 2021, there are quite a few challenges ahead.

Challenges

The transition is not likely to be easy. First of all, a cultural shift is needed. This can be enabled through appropriate dissemination of the importance of choice and flexibility, and for young people to be exposed to a variety of subjects. In an environment where the sports and 'co-curricular' periods are generally used for 'extra classes', stressing the importance of all subjects and convincing teachers and parents of the relevance of each subject will be the first challenge. Sharing the standards with all stakeholders in a manner that can be easily understood by laypersons, holding events in schools (particularly in rural and remote areas) would be useful. Improving the status of non-science and vocational subjects through expanding their ambit and indicating viable career choices based on their study must be done through interactions with parents and students, having eminent persons speak about these on social and mass media, and through guidance and counselling would be helpful in this aspect.

The next challenge is getting sufficient number of qualified teachers in a scenario where we are already faced with a shortage of

teachers in science, mathematics, language, geography and vocational subjects. Added to this, are the varying service conditions of teachers within the same school, teaching the same classes as a result of teachers on contract or other forms of employment. While the Policy mentions master instructors, eminent persons or experts drawn from the community (GoI 2020, Para 5.60), they are meant to teach 'traditional local arts, vocational crafts, entrepreneurship, agriculture, or any other subject where local expertise exists, to benefit students and help preserve and promote local knowledge and professions'. Further, the Policy clarifies that they will undergo short courses before they start teaching (GoI 2020, Para 5.25). The Policy also emphasises the need for teachers to have quality service conditions, necessary learning infrastructure and resources, along with suitable processes for performance management (GoI 2020, Paras 5.8-5.14). Hence, investment in teachers as well as in their professional development are key to the transition. This becomes even more important when one considers the issues that exist related to equity and quality due to either teacher vacancies or non-availability of sufficient teachers across subjects, particularly in schools in remote and disadvantaged geographies. While school clusters/complexes are proposed as a means to address this aspect, the culture of collaboration and sharing will have to be built and nurtured by school leaders and education functionaries. This would require a shift in the leadership culture that prevails currently – due capacity building will be needed in addition to extensive guidelines that are localised to each context. Building capacity of the community, particularly the school (complex) management committees will be key in making this shift. The institutional development plans must also reflect these transitions.

To simplify and make explicit the changes, Boards will have to re-align themselves and support affiliated schools to make the transition. This will require

reflection and communication across Boards to ensure equivalence. While standards will help make this possible, caution related to narrow interpretations of these standards and the tendency to restrict textbooks and teaching to those that are easily assessed must be placed. This would require intensive handholding across schools, and frequent interaction.

Conclusion

The kernel of some of these practices already exists across Boards. For example, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) offers a range of subjects and has a provision for candidates who have opted to study privately

to take examinations in subjects of their choice. The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) offers a number of subjects categorised as 'groups', with students having the choice to take a minimum or a maximum number of subjects from within these groups.

Hence, the change is possible. What we have to plan for is changes in phases, while supporting all stakeholders and providing ample opportunities for interaction and reflection. Close inquiry into how implementation is progressing, best practices that are emerging and flagging challenges will be key. Above all, time and patience will be required for the greater good of our children.

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