Inclusive and Equitable Foundations: NEP 2020, FLN, and the Transformation of Primary Education in India

Zoya Ansari

Independent Researcher, ORCID ID: 0009-0005-1932-8350
zoya.ansari@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

Everyone agrees that elementary school shapes a child's cognitive, social-emotional, and intellectual paths. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report and UNICEF learning recovery programs recommend achieving foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by third grade to prepare students for future education. INDIA'S NEP 2020, a historic education reform, prioritizes FLN with programs like NIPUN Bharat, multilingual instruction, experiential pedagogy, and holistic student development. This study examines how well NEP 2020 has achieved its goals in elementary education (Grades 1–5). Government policy papers, NAS results, ASER data, and grassroots innovations reveal serious gaps in equity-sensitive pedagogy, resource allocation, and teacher development. Comparisons with Vietnam and Finland show that India's changes are comparable and different from worldwide best practices. To narrow the policy-practice gap, the report recommends increasing social-emotional learning, teacher professional development, resource equality, and civil society participation. The study revealed that localized, equity-driven, and context-sensitive implementation techniques were needed to implement NEP 2020's transformation framework.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), NIPUN Bharat, Primary Education, Equity, Policy–Practice Gap.

1. Introduction

Foundational to an individual's later academic and personal success, as well as their social and emotional growth, primary schooling sets the stage for a lifetime of learning. Everyone agrees that the first five years of elementary school are formative, because that's when kids learn the ropes and establish a foundation for the rest of their learning lives. Among these, the ability to read comprehension and execute basic math operations by the end of third grade (known as Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, or FLN) has become a worldwide standard for educational quality [1]. Children experience difficulty advancing to higher grades and may even drop out of school altogether if they do not possess these competencies. This necessity is underscored by international frameworks. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) is emphasized in the Global Education Monitoring Report by UNESCO, and in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, recovery activities by UNICEF have brought attention to the necessity of FLN in constructing resilient education systems [2]. The early investments in teacher training and equity-sensitive interventions made by countries like Finland and Vietnam show how robust FLN systems can change educational results over time. With more than 250 million students enrolled in elementary school, India has one of the world's biggest education systems. There is evidence from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) that demonstrates significant gaps in fundamental reading

and arithmetic skills, sometimes termed as a "learning crisis" [3], even though programs like the Right to Education Act (2009) expanded enrollment. This endangers India's demographic dividend and makes it harder for the country to fulfill its global Sustainable Development Goals.

As the top policy objective, FLN is positioned in the historic National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. A move away from memorization and toward inclusive and child-centered methods is signaled by changes that promote multilingual instruction, experiential pedagogy, and holistic child development, as well as by programs like the NIPUN Bharat Mission [4]. However, it is still difficult to turn this lofty goal into practical classroom practices. Problems with social-emotional learning (SEL) integration, inequitable distribution of resources, and teacher readiness persist [5]. Using FLN as a case study, this article analyzes NEP 2020's policy-practice dynamics in the elementary education sector. It delves into the extent to which the policy goal has been achieved in classrooms, pinpoints ongoing deficiencies, and places India's situation within international standards. The study's overarching research question is as follows:

To what extent has NEP 2020 been successful in bringing its FLN vision into classroom practices, and what changes are needed to close the gap between policy and practice?

2. Primary Education in India: Context and Challenges

Overview of the Landscape

With almost 250 million students in a wide variety of locales, India's primary education system is massive. Much improvement in access has been achieved during the previous 20 years. Gender parity in enrollment has been substantially attained, thanks to initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act (2009). Enrollment rates in most states are over 95%. Concerns regarding quality have grown in recent years, and enrollment has not translated into equivalent learning outcomes, notwithstanding these milestones [6].

Pressing Problems in India's Elementary Education System

Despite remarkable progress in access, India's elementary education system continues to face pressing challenges that hinder its effectiveness. The most alarming issue is the learning crisis, as highlighted by ASER 2022, which found that a majority of Grade 5 students in rural areas could not read a simple Grade 2-level text. This shows that while enrolment is high, learning outcomes remain severely deficient. Teacher shortages add to this crisis: a UNESCO 2021 report estimated that over eleven million teaching positions remain vacant in India. Many rural schools are forced to function with a single teacher managing multiple grades, while those teachers who are available often lack adequate professional training and support. Consequently, classrooms fail to provide personalized learning and children progress without mastering foundational skills. Infrastructure gaps exacerbate these problems. Even though new schools have been constructed, quality remains inconsistent, especially in rural regions. Issues such as lack of safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, libraries, and internet access compromise both health and learning. The CAG's 2018 audit revealed that over 60% of schools lacked safe drinking water, creating unhygienic and unwelcoming environments that hinder concentration and attendance. Gender disparities, though narrowing, persist in terms of retention. Girls from rural and marginalized backgrounds often drop out due to socio-economic pressures such as child marriage, household responsibilities, and

poverty. UDISE 2020–21 data shows dropout rates of 10.1% among girls compared to 7.1% for boys at the elementary level. Regional disparities also remain stark: according to the NSO survey, while nearly 28% of urban children attend pre-primary schools, only about 11% of rural children do so, leaving many rural students underprepared for primary schooling.
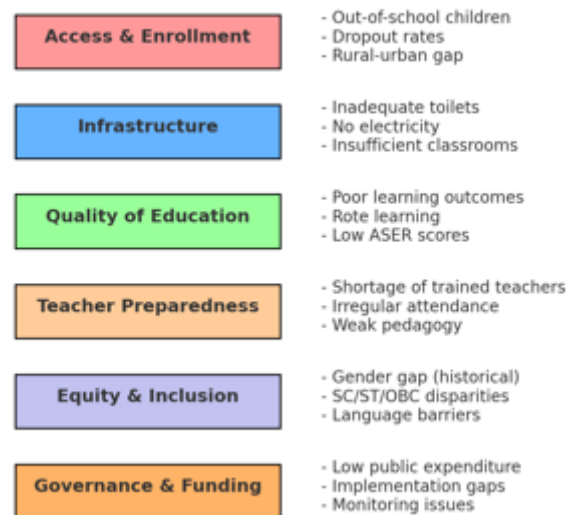

Fig. 1: Challenges of Primary Education in India

Oxfam India (2018) reported that nearly 40% of children from disadvantaged communities were out of school, highlighting inequitable access. The status of women and gender inequality further compounds the issue, with literacy rates showing a wide gap-84.7% for men versus 70.3% for women according to UNESCO's 2020 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*. Finally, inadequate funding weakens reform implementation. The Samagra Shiksha scheme, central to reversing learning losses, received only a marginal 0.18% increase in allocation in 2023–24, insufficient to meet systemic needs.
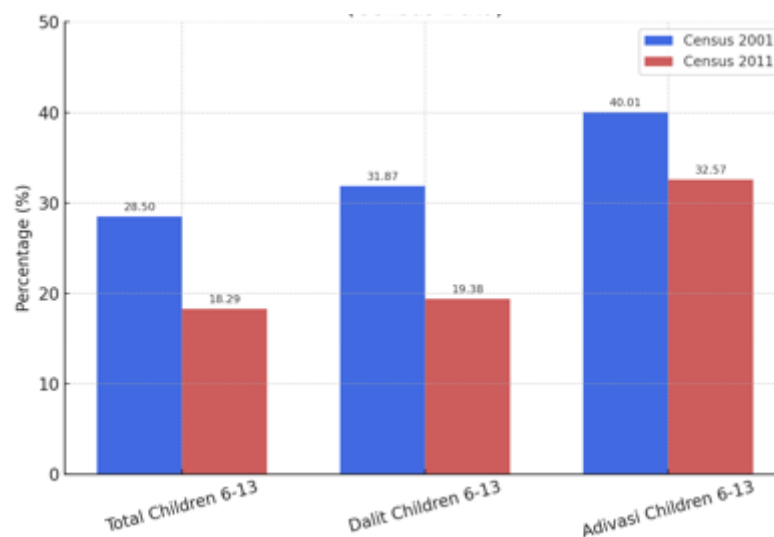
Graph 1: Percentage of Indian Children(6-13) non attending Educational Institutions by Caste (Census Data)

Government Programs to Strengthen Elementary and Secondary Education

To address these challenges, the Government of India has rolled out comprehensive initiatives under the Samagra Shiksha program, which integrates efforts across pre-primary, primary, and secondary schooling. Key interventions include:

- *PM-POSHAN (formerly Mid-Day Meal Scheme):* This program ensures that every child in government and aided schools receives one hot cooked meal daily. By improving nutrition and reducing hunger, it has significantly boosted attendance and retention, especially among marginalized communities.
- *Mahila Samakhya:* A pioneering initiative aimed at empowering rural women from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds through education. It specifically targets women from SC/ST households and landless families, building confidence and enabling them to support their children's schooling.
- *SPQEM (Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas):* This seeks to modernize madrasas by introducing subjects such as science, mathematics, and languages alongside religious education, ensuring that Muslim children gain parity with mainstream learners.
- *NIPUN Bharat Mission:* Launched under Samagra Shiksha, it specifically targets the achievement of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by Grade 3 by 2026–27. The mission prioritizes early grade assessments, teacher training, and competency-based teaching.
- *NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement):* A large-scale capacity-building program that aims to improve teacher effectiveness. It emphasizes critical thinking, learner-centered pedagogy, and school leadership development to enhance teaching quality at the primary level.
- *PM e-VIDYA:* Introduced to expand digital access, this initiative consolidates all online, on-air, and digital learning platforms. It includes the DIKSHA platform, which offers digital resources for teachers and students, Swayam Prabha TV channels, MOOCs through SWAYAM, and even radio broadcasts, ensuring multi-modal access to education across socio-economic groups.
- *STARS Program (Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States):* A $500 million partnership with the World Bank focusing on six states-Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Rajasthan. It aims to improve governance, monitoring, and accountability in school education systems.
- *Centrally Funded Schools:* Institutions like Kendriya Vidyalayas, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, and Central Tibetan Schools provide quality schooling to around 1.3 million students nationwide, serving as models of accessible, well-managed education.

These initiatives represent a multi-pronged approach, balancing access, equity, teacher development, and digital integration.

Rules and Regulations: The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 is the cornerstone of India's education rights framework. It guarantees free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 and mandates the government to ensure universal enrolment. Among its critical provisions are the 25% reservation of seats in private schools for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring equity across socio-economic lines. It defines standards for pupil-teacher ratios, infrastructure requirements, teacher qualifications, and working conditions, thereby setting a benchmark for quality. The Act prohibits exploitative practices such as capitation fees, admission screening, corporal punishment, psychological harassment, and private tutoring by teachers. It requires all schools to be recognized, thereby discouraging the spread of unregulated institutions. Importantly, the RTE mandates the formation of School Management Committees (SMCs) comprising parents, teachers, and community members to oversee governance, thereby decentralizing accountability. Financial responsibility for implementing the Act is shared between the central and state governments. Over time, amendments have sought to refine its impact-for instance, the 2019 amendment abolished the "No Detention Policy," allowing states to hold examinations and reintroduce grade retention where necessary to maintain accountability. Fundamentally, the RTE Act envisions a child-friendly, inclusive education system free of fear and anxiety, positioning itself as both a legal guarantee and a moral commitment to equity in education.

Critical Reflection

A critical reflection on India's primary education system reveals a deep paradox: while access to schooling has become almost universal, learning outcomes remain alarmingly low. Large-scale surveys such as ASER (2018) and NAS (2021) consistently show that a significant proportion of children complete the primary grades without acquiring basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. This indicates that mere enrollment gains, achieved through initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act, have not translated into meaningful learning. The NEP 2020 seeks to address this crisis by setting an ambitious goal of achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by 2026–27 under the NIPUN Bharat Mission. However, unless systemic bottlenecks are addressed with urgency, this target risks remaining aspirational rather than achievable. The foremost challenges lie in teacher capacity, where short-term, theoretical training fails to equip educators with the skills needed for differentiated instruction, formative assessments, and managing diverse classrooms. Simultaneously, equitable allocation of resources across states and districts remains uneven, with under-resourced regions like Bihar and Jharkhand lagging far behind better-performing states such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh. Compounding these issues is the persistent marginalization of disadvantaged groups, including children from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, rural households, and low-income families, whose learning opportunities are curtailed by poverty, malnutrition, and irregular attendance. Unless policy implementation prioritizes these structural inequities alongside classroom-level reforms, India's efforts to achieve NEP 2020's FLN goals will fall short. In this sense, the learning crisis is not merely an educational issue but a developmental imperative, demanding immediate focus on teacher empowerment, equitable resourcing, and targeted support for the most vulnerable learners.

3. Primary Education in the Context of NEP 2020

Vision and Key Reforms

In a significant shift away from input-driven methods and toward outcome-based goals, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a framework that is child-centric, holistic, and inclusive. An extensive series of changes intended to transform learning processes is articulated by the policy for the primary stage (Grades 1-5). The reforms place an emphasis on equity, quality, and flexibility [7].

FLN Priority. At the heart of NEP 2020 lies the recognition that Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is the most critical prerequisite for all future learning. Without achieving these basic skills by Grade 3, children struggle to cope with the academic demands of higher grades, creating what has been described as "learning poverty." To address this, the Government of India launched the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) in 2021, setting the ambitious target of achieving universal FLN by 2026–27. The mission focuses on building strong competencies in reading and numeracy through structured early grade interventions, continuous assessments, and diagnostic tools that help teachers identify and support struggling learners. A strong emphasis is placed on teacher capacity-building, with training modules designed to equip teachers with child-centered, play-based strategies for literacy and numeracy instruction. NIPUN Bharat also integrates global benchmarks set by agencies like UNESCO and UNICEF, situating India's FLN goals within a wider international commitment to equitable and inclusive education [8].
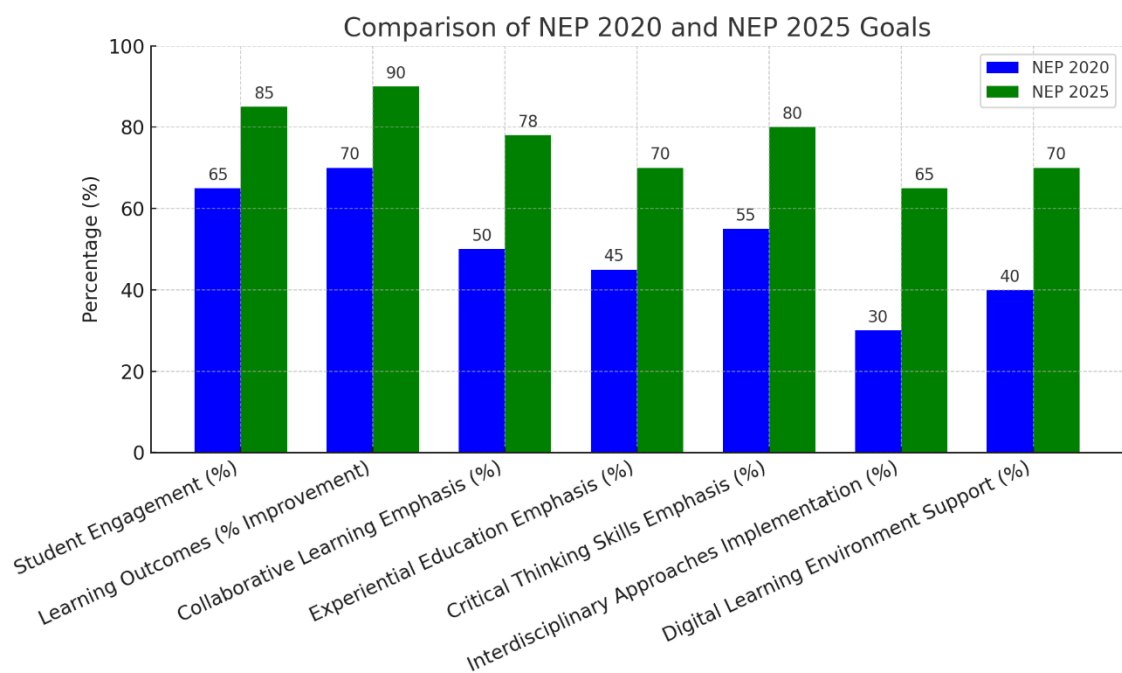
Graph 2: Comparison of NEP 2020 and NEP 2025 Goals

Multilingual Instruction. India's immense linguistic diversity, with over 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of regional dialects, makes language policy a critical factor in primary education. NEP 2020 acknowledges the pedagogical and cultural value of teaching in a child's mother tongue or home language during the early grades. Research consistently shows that children learn faster and more effectively when concepts are introduced in a language they understand, thereby reducing dropout rates and

improving long-term retention [9]. This approach also strengthens children's cultural identity and promotes inclusivity in classrooms where English or dominant regional languages have historically overshadowed local languages. By advocating multilingual pedagogy, NEP 2020 seeks to create classrooms that reflect India's cultural richness while aligning with global evidence that early learning in the mother tongue improves both literacy outcomes and socio-emotional development. However, implementing this vision requires significant investment in developing teaching-learning materials in multiple languages, as well as training teachers to work effectively in multilingual contexts.

Experiential Pedagogy. NEP 2020 explicitly moves away from rote-based instruction, which has long dominated India's classrooms, and calls for a transition toward activity-based, play-oriented, and inquiry-driven learning. The policy emphasizes that children learn best when they engage in discovery, questioning, and problem-solving rather than passive memorization of facts. Experiential pedagogy involves integrating arts, crafts, music, games, and digital tools into the learning process, making classrooms more engaging and contextually relevant. For example, mathematics can be taught through storytelling, games, or locally available materials, while language learning can be enhanced through role play, dramatization, and interactive reading exercises. Such approaches are closely aligned with international best practices in primary education, particularly in countries like Finland, where playful learning environments are associated with higher levels of creativity, collaboration, and socio-emotional resilience [10]. The experiential model not only enhances cognitive outcomes but also equips children with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and communication, bridging the gap between foundational learning and lifelong competencies.

Inclusive Education. Another cornerstone of NEP 2020 is its strong emphasis on inclusive education, ensuring that every child-regardless of ability, gender, or socio-economic background-has access to equitable learning opportunities. The policy envisions mainstreaming children with disabilities (CwDs), socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), and first-generation learners into regular schools. It calls for the establishment of resource centers and special educators, the adaptation of curricula for learners with varied needs, and the use of technology-enabled solutions to reach children in remote or underprivileged areas. Importantly, NEP 2020 introduces mechanisms like the Gender-Inclusion Fund and targeted scholarships to address structural inequities, particularly for girls and children from marginalized communities [11]. The inclusive framework also promotes community engagement, recognizing that sustainable educational equity requires the participation of families, local bodies, and civil society. By embedding inclusion as a guiding principle, NEP 2020 aligns with the global vision of "leave no child behind" under SDG 4, while acknowledging India's unique socio-cultural complexities.

Ambitions vs. Continuity. Although NEP 2020 expands upon preceding reforms like SSA and the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009), it breaks new ground by explicitly prioritizing FLN [12]. Prior strategies placed more emphasis on expanding access and infrastructure and gave less weight to learning results. Equally important to RTE's goal of establishing free and compulsory education was SSA's emphasis on universal enrollment and mid-day meals. But NEP 2020 takes it a step further by making FLN the "highest priority of the education system" in elementary school, recognizing that later investments in education will have little impact without strong fundamental skills

[13]. Its objective is to demand accountability centered on outcomes and structural change, while its continuity is in its reinforcement of equity and universal access ideals from previous reforms. Crucially, NEP 2020 bridges the gap between fundamental abilities and future-ready capacities by integrating critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy into primary education. These competences are essential for success in the modern world. A more sophisticated comprehension of the multifaceted requirements of students in today's technologically advanced and increasingly globalized society is reflected in this comprehensive strategy [14].

Critical Reflection

Innovation and evolution are encapsulated in NEP 2020 as they pertain to primary education. A radical departure from earlier universalization approaches toward quality-centric universalization is marked by its child-centered innovations. It will take forward-thinking policies and strong implementation frameworks, especially in areas like teacher preparation, the creation of bilingual materials, and evaluation systems, to reach these objectives. Resolving the long-standing inequalities across India's states and districts is crucial to the policy's potential to bring about transformation.

4. Policy–Practice Dynamics: Gaps and Ground Realities

More people are aware of how important FLN is now that NEP 2020 changes and NIPUN Bharat Mission (2021) have been implemented. Now more than ever, FLN is recognized as an important focus area for Grades 1-3 by state governments, school officials, and teachers. There is a glaring discrepancy between policy goals and classroom practice, according to ASER surveys, civil society evaluations, and the Ministry of Education's (2022–2023) implementation reports. Most schools still depend significantly on textbook-driven instruction and rote memorization, even though the policy promotes activity-based, experiential pedagogy and bilingual learning. This chasm is most pronounced in reading instruction for elementary school students, where the focus is still on decoding words mechanically rather than on helping students understand and express themselves creatively.

One of the most persistent gaps in implementing NEP 2020 lies in teacher preparedness. While the policy envisions continuous professional development, training under the NIPUN Bharat Mission has often been confined to short-term, one-off workshops. These sessions, usually delivered through cascade models, tend to dilute content quality, leaving teachers with limited practical skills. Many teachers report that such trainings remain largely theoretical and disconnected from classroom realities, offering little concrete guidance on differentiated instruction or formative assessments. The absence of sustained mentoring and classroom-embedded support further weakens the impact of these initiatives, as teachers rarely receive ongoing coaching necessary for translating new strategies into daily practice. Additionally, a considerable number of teachers struggle with conducting continuous and competency-based assessments, a critical component of NEP's FLN vision, and instead continue to rely on annual examinations or summative evaluations. Another critical gap lies in multilingual pedagogy-despite NEP's emphasis on mother tongue instruction, few teachers are adequately trained to handle linguistically diverse classrooms, especially in states with multiple local languages. Collectively, these shortcomings in teacher capacity directly affect children's classroom experiences, making it difficult to achieve the ambitious FLN targets and undermining the transformative potential of NEP 2020.

Given that education is a concurrent issue, states are mostly responsible for implementing the NEP 2020's united national vision for improving primary education. Because of this, there are now large regional differences in the results. As an example, states like Himachal Pradesh and Kerala have achieved early success with FLN programs by capitalizing on their superior infrastructure, lower student-teacher ratios, and well-established teacher mentoring programs. They are highly in line with the goals of NEP 2020 in that they prioritize libraries, community involvement, and parental involvement. The successful implementation of policy is greatly impeded in resource-constrained states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh due to systemic issues such as teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding or classes with multiple grades, and overcrowded classrooms. Workbooks, activity kits, and digital learning tools are not always available due to budgetary disparities between states, which further complicates matters. On one hand, the federal government provides policy guidelines and partial financial support. On the other hand, state-level budget allocations vary considerably. This disparity hinders the goal of NEP, which is to provide inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all students, and it slows down development on a national level while simultaneously widening regional educational gaps.

Although NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on holistic student development, the reality in classrooms is still heavily tilted towards academic competencies, with little attention given to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL, which includes essential skills such as empathy, resilience, collaboration, and self-regulation, remains largely absent from teacher training modules and daily classroom activities. Teachers often equate student success solely with test scores, neglecting the socio-emotional aspects of learning that play a critical role in student engagement, motivation, and retention. Research consistently demonstrates that integrating SEL into school curricula not only improves attendance and classroom participation but also fosters healthier peer interactions-benefits that are particularly crucial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, in many Indian classrooms, performance pressures and rigid academic expectations result in heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and disengagement among students. Some schools that experimented with structured SEL interventions, such as simple mindfulness exercises or collaborative group activities, have reported improvements in classroom climate, student confidence, and overall well-being. Yet, these promising practices remain isolated cases rather than systemic approaches. Without a deliberate integration of SEL into the mainstream curriculum, India risks producing children who are literate but emotionally unprepared to face the challenges of the future, thereby undermining the broader goals of holistic education envisioned in NEP 2020.

In contrast to top-down implementation challenges, grassroots and community-led interventions have shown considerable promise in bridging learning gaps. A notable example is Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) program, which has been widely studied for its effectiveness in improving FLN outcomes. By regrouping children based on their actual learning levels rather than age or grade, TaRL has achieved significant improvements in basic reading and arithmetic skills. Its success lies not only in pedagogy but also in its adaptability across diverse contexts. The program has been scaled across multiple states, including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, with measurable learning gains documented by independent evaluations. Beyond scalability, TaRL demonstrates the value of community involvement, where local volunteers and parents actively participate in running reading

camps or remedial classes. Such ownership at the community level creates a supportive ecosystem that complements government initiatives and ensures greater accountability. Despite this evidence of impact, mainstreaming challenges remain. Many successful grassroots models continue as pilot projects and fail to gain consistent integration within the formal education system. Bureaucratic inertia, fragmented coordination between NGOs and state departments, and the absence of long-term policy backing have limited the widespread adoption of such innovative practices. These models underscore the transformative potential of bottom-up approaches but also highlight the urgent need for systemic support and policy alignment to ensure sustainability and scale.

5. Critical Reflections and Comparative Insights

Harmony with Internationally Recognized Standards
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India is in perfect harmony with international standards for quality elementary education. The Finnish model of primary and early childhood education is known for its emphasis on formative assessments, teacher autonomy, and play-based teaching. Due to their low-stakes assessment culture and emphasis on fun in learning rather than rote instruction, nearly all Finnish children achieve basic literacy by the end of Grade 2. Similarly, despite being a lower-middle income country, Vietnam has become an incredible success story in basic learning. Vietnamese 15-year-olds outperformed their peers in nations with greater GDP per capita on the 2018 PISA reading and math tests, which compared them to other OECD nations. Strong mechanisms for educating teachers, thorough assessments in the classroom, and curriculum coherence have all been associated to this achievement.
Similarities between these approaches and India's NEP 2020 goal are most apparent in the advocacy of competency-based learning, experiential pedagogy, and bilingual education. India has joined the worldwide agreement that fair growth is driven by quality learning and not only enrollment by highlighting FLN as an essential basis.

Divergences
In spite of these shared goals, India's approach differs greatly from the equity-sensitive models advocated by international organizations like UNICEF and UNESCO. Equity, socio-emotional learning (SEL), and inclusion must take precedence over literacy and numeracy results in FLN reforms, according to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2021). Standardized accomplishment benchmarks, on the other hand, tend to dominate India's strategy. For example, while there were large differences between states, the National Achievement Survey (NAS 2021) found that just 42% of third graders nationwide demonstrated the desired level of proficiency in math and language arts. Overshadowed by the comprehensive and equity-driven aims stated in NEP 2020, the focus on quantifiable outcomes runs the danger of reducing learning to test results. Integrating SEL is crucial for student well-being and academic resilience, according to worldwide frameworks. Still, SEL isn't given much of a chance in India's classrooms or teacher preparation programs. While India may make headway in its efforts to improve students' numeracy, it runs the danger of falling short in its larger objective of developing students' self-assurance and emotional resilience.

Missing Links
Integrating SEL Systematically: UNICEF (2022) found that SEL programs greatly decreased dropout rates and increased attendance by 15-20%, particularly for

underprivileged populations. Nevertheless, SEL in India is still limited to small-scale trial programs, as there is no comprehensive framework in place. Teachers in Finland come from the top 10% of college grads, which contributes to their strong sense of professional identity and the fact that they are very invested in the success of the country's reforms. In contrast, ASER 2022 brought attention to the fact that more than 40% of rural teachers in India were unprepared in FLN pedagogy, and that low pay and limited autonomy frequently demotivate instructors. Reforms run the risk of being compliance-driven if they do not elevate teachers' prestige and invest in professional identity. Curriculum Reforms in Vietnam Prioritize Contextual Flexibility, Facilitating Local Adaptation While Upholding National Standards. But in India, both the curriculum and the exams are still dictated from the center, so there's not much room for adaptation to different language and socioeconomic backgrounds. In states like Assam and Jharkhand, where the official language is not English but pupils frequently encounter a language barrier at home, this inflexibility impedes their capacity to study effectively.

Table 1: Comparative Insights on FLN and Primary Education Practices

Dimension	India (NEP 2020)	Finland	Vietnam	UNICEF/UNESCO FLN Frameworks
Core Vision	Universal FLN by Grade 3 through NIPUN Bharat; multilingualism, experiential pedagogy, inclusion	Play-based early childhood education; focus on joy of learning, equity, and teacher autonomy	Strong foundational skills with focus on math and reading; coherent national curriculum	Ensure foundational skills for all with emphasis on equity, inclusion, and socio-emotional development
Literacy Outcomes	NAS 2021: Only 42% of Grade 3 students meet expected proficiency in language & math; wide state disparities	Nearly 100% literacy by Grade 2; consistent reading comprehension outcomes	Among top performers in PISA 2018; outperformed many OECD countries despite lower GDP	Framework goal: reduce "learning poverty" (currently 57% globally cannot read by age 10, World Bank–UNESCO–UNICEF, 2021)
Teacher Preparation	Limited, often one-off workshops under NIPUN Bharat; weak mentoring & low professional identity (ASER 2022: 40% rural teachers underprepared in FLN pedagogy)	Teachers recruited from top 10% of graduates; master's-level qualifications mandatory; strong autonomy and respect	Rigorous teacher training; strong mentoring systems; consistent in-classroom support	Stress on teacher empowerment, professional identity, and continuous professional development

Dimension	India (NEP 2020)	Finland	Vietnam	UNICEF/UNESCO FLN Frameworks
Pedagogy	Activity- and competency-based learning promoted, but practice often reverts to rote memorization	Play-based, inquiry-driven pedagogy; strong formative assessment	Curriculum coherence, mastery learning, focus on basics; consistent national assessments	Emphasis on child-centered, inclusive, and context-sensitive pedagogy
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Policy mentions holistic learning, but SEL largely absent from training and classrooms; pilot initiatives only	SEL embedded through collaborative play, group work, and student autonomy	SEL not a separate component but embedded in teacher-student relationships & mentoring	Explicit focus on SEL as a core part of FLN frameworks to improve motivation, attendance, and resilience
Equity and Inclusion	Commitment in policy, but persistent disparities (rural vs. urban, caste, gender, state-level differences)	Strong equity focus; free meals, healthcare, and universal childcare support	Education reforms explicitly target disadvantaged rural learners; high equity despite resource constraints	Core principle: prioritize marginalized learners, girls, and multilingual contexts
Curriculum Flexibility	Mostly centrally designed; limited scope for contextual adaptation	Local curriculum design allowed within national framework	Curriculum responsive to local needs; teacher input valued	Advocates for contextual flexibility and adaptation to local languages and need

6. Recommendations and Way Forward

1. Establish continuous professional development for teachers supported by mentoring and peer-support networks.
2. Prioritize funding for states and districts that face the widest learning gaps to ensure equitable resource distribution.
3. Integrate social-emotional learning into both curriculum and assessments to support holistic development of learners.
4. Expand partnerships with NGOs and local communities to replicate and scale successful grassroots innovations.
5. Develop flexible assessment models that balance national benchmarks with localized, context-sensitive evaluation strategies.

7.Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a transformative and forward-looking framework for strengthening India's primary education system by placing foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), multilingual instruction, and holistic learning at the heart of early education reforms. However, the true impact of this visionary policy depends on bridging the persistent policy–practice gap that exists between its ambitious design and ground-level realities. While the NEP has successfully reframed the discourse from enrolment and access toward learning quality and equity, challenges such as inadequate teacher preparation, uneven resource allocation, weak integration of social-emotional learning (SEL), and limited mainstreaming of community-driven innovations continue to hinder its effectiveness. To translate the NEP's aspirations into lived classroom realities, India must invest in building robust teacher capacity through continuous professional development, ensure equitable distribution of resources across diverse states and districts, embed SEL into the curriculum to nurture emotionally resilient learners, and strengthen partnerships with NGOs and local communities to scale grassroots innovations like Teaching at the Right Level.

Bridging these gaps is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency but a national imperative that directly contributes to India's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education). More importantly, it ensures that every child-regardless of caste, gender, income, or geography-has access to the foundational skills essential for lifelong learning, employability, and meaningful social participation. By addressing these systemic gaps, NEP 2020 has the potential to transform India's primary education landscape into one that is not only inclusive and equitable but also globally significant. The successful realization of NEP's vision would stand as a powerful testament to India's commitment to evidence-based educational reform, while also offering valuable lessons for other countries grappling with the universal challenge of achieving FLN at scale. In this sense, the transformation of primary education through NEP 2020 represents both a national necessity and a global contribution to the collective pursuit of equitable, high-quality education for all.

References

[1] Hanushek, Eric A., and Ludger Woessmann. *The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth.* MIT Press, 2015.

[2] UNESCO. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021: Non-State Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?* UNESCO Publishing, 2021.

[3] ASER Centre. *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018.* New Delhi: Pratham, 2019.

[4] Ministry of Education, Government of India. *National Education Policy 2020.* Government of India, 2020.

[5] NCERT. *National Achievement Survey 2021: Summary Report.* National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2022.

[6] Ministry of Education, Government of India. *National Education Policy 2020.* Government of India, 2020.

[7] Government of India. *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, 2020.

[8] Ministry of Education. *NIPUN Bharat: National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy*. Government of India, 2021.

[9] UNESCO. *If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?* Global Education Monitoring Report, Policy Paper 24, Feb. 2016.

[10] Sahlberg, Pasi. *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* Teachers College Press, 2015.

[11] UNICEF. *Towards Inclusive Education: The Impact of Disability on School Attendance in Developing Countries*. United Nations Children's Fund, 2020.

[12] Government of India. *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009.

[13] Jhingran, Dhir. "Improving the Quality of Primary Education in India: A Review of Policy Perspectives." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2012, pp. 68–76.

[14] Srivastava, Prachi. "NEP 2020: A Paradigm Shift toward Outcome-Based Education in India." *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 89, 2022, 102534.