

TRANSFORMATIVE SHIFT IN EDUCATION: NEP 2020'S IMPACT ON STUDENT CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT: The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the essential role of critical thinking in equipping students for the challenges of the 21st century, aiming to integrate it throughout the education system to cultivate a culture of inquiry, analysis, and innovation. It prioritizes the enhancement of each student's 'creative potential.' As Ken Robinson states, 'Creativity is now as vital in education as literacy, and we should regard it with equal importance.' Cultivating critical thinking skills requires practice and often includes activities such as text analysis, debate participation, problem-solving, and evidence evaluation. This skill is applicable in various life areas, including academic, professional, and everyday decision-making contexts. The policy asserts that the primary goal of education should extend beyond merely developing cognitive skills—encompassing both 'higher-order cognitive capabilities' like critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as foundational skills in numeracy and literacy—to also include the nurturing of emotional, social, and ethical capacities and dispositions. It promotes creativity, innovation, and unconventional thinking at all educational levels, supported by effective governance, autonomy, and empowerment. This paper seeks to investigate how the National Education Policy 2020 can serve as a transformative initiative in education to enhance critical thinking among students.

KEYWORDS: Cultivating Critical Thinking, Innovation, Unconventional, National Education Policy 2020, Empowerment, Creativity.

INTRODUCTION: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 serves as a detailed framework aimed at overhauling India's educational landscape. It prioritizes adaptable, interdisciplinary learning, comprehensive development, and the incorporation of technology within educational settings. Unveiled by the Ministry of Education on July 29, 2020, this policy seeks to enhance creativity and critical thinking among learners in the 21st century, fostering logical reasoning and innovation. The updated policy aims to acknowledge, identify, and nurture the distinct abilities and talents of each individual. To achieve this, it introduces significant modifications to the school curriculum and teaching methods, making both school and higher education more holistic, experiential, integrated, student-centered, discussion-oriented, discovery-focused, inquiry-based, flexible, and enjoyable.

CRITICAL THINKING: Elder and Paul define critical thinking as a mode of thought that enhances the quality of one's thinking by actively managing the inherent structures of thought and applying intellectual standards. This essential skill encompasses the analysis of information, assessment of arguments, and formulation of reasoned conclusions. It involves questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence, and grasping the complexities of situations prior to making decisions. Critical thinkers can identify biases, detect logical fallacies, and assess the merits and drawbacks of various viewpoints. A crucial element of critical thinking is the willingness to remain open-minded and consider differing perspectives, even those that may contradict personal beliefs. Additionally, it requires the ability to articulate thoughts clearly and effectively, both in spoken and written forms. Cultivating critical thinking skills necessitates practice and often includes activities such as text analysis, participation in debates, problem-solving, and evidence evaluation. This skill is invaluable across various domains, including education, professional environments, and daily decision-making.

NEP 2020 AND CRITICAL THINKING: The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes fostering each student's 'creative potential.' As Ken Robinson stated, 'Creativity is as crucial in education as literacy, and it deserves equal recognition.' Critical thinking is a key element of NEP 2020, highlighting the need to cultivate analytical skills, problem-solving capabilities, and creativity in students. The policy advocates for leveraging technology to enhance research, collaboration, and problem-solving, thereby equipping students with critical thinking skills suited for the digital era. It also recommends reducing the curriculum's overwhelming content load, allowing educators and students to focus on a deeper understanding of concepts rather than merely

covering extensive information. Furthermore, the policy asserts that the primary goal of education should extend beyond developing cognitive skills—encompassing both 'higher-order cognitive abilities' like critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as foundational skills in numeracy and literacy. It also aims to nurture emotional, social, and ethical capacities. The NEP encourages creativity, innovation, and unconventional thinking across all educational levels, supported by effective governance, autonomy, and empowerment.

The National Education Policy 2020 recommends several measures to foster creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among students:

- 1. Transition from Rote Learning to Conceptual Understanding:** The policy emphasizes the importance of conceptual clarity over rote memorization and exam-oriented learning. It aims to enhance not only cognitive development but also to instill ethical, character, and constitutional values, preparing students with essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, scientific reasoning, creativity, problem-solving, intellectual curiosity, digital literacy, and social responsibility. The primary objective of the National Education Policy is to transform the Indian education system towards genuine understanding, teaching children 'how to learn' and moving away from the traditional rote learning methods prevalent in many schools today.
- 2. Experiential Learning:** The National Education Policy emphasizes the importance of hands-on, experiential learning techniques rather than traditional rote memorization. Through engaging in projects, experiments, and field trips, students enhance their critical thinking abilities by applying theoretical concepts to practical scenarios, evaluating results, and making well-informed choices. The policy encourages educational institutions to implement experiential learning at all levels, incorporating various pedagogical strategies such as hands-on activities, storytelling, and integration of arts and sports into the curriculum. The art-integrated approach aims to strengthen the connection between education and culture, while sports-integrated learning serves as a cross-disciplinary teaching method. This method incorporates physical activities, including traditional sports, into educational practices to foster skills like collaboration, initiative, self-direction, discipline, teamwork, responsibility, and citizenship. Ultimately, it aims to support the comprehensive development of students by enhancing their physical and mental health and improving their cognitive skills.
- 3. ASSESSMENT REFORMS:** The NEP 2020 advocates for a transition from traditional summative assessments to a model of continuous and comprehensive evaluation. This approach prioritizes the evaluation of students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills over rote memorization. It encourages students to engage in critical thinking, creatively solve problems, and demonstrate their knowledge through diverse assessment methods such as projects, presentations, and portfolios. The policy suggests that educational institutions adopt

Competency-based Assessments to foster higher-order skills, including critical thinking, conceptual clarity, and analytical abilities. Another significant reform is the introduction of the 360-degree, Multidimensional Report Card, which provides a comprehensive view of each learner's progress and individuality across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This report card incorporates self-assessment and peer assessment, reflecting the child's development in project-based and inquiry-based learning, quizzes, role plays, group activities, portfolios, and teacher evaluations. It serves as a crucial connection between home and school, complemented by parent-teacher meetings to actively engage parents in their children's holistic education and growth. To address the drawbacks of the current assessment system and reduce the reliance on coaching classes, the policy suggests redesigning Board exams to promote overall development. These exams should be simplified, offering more flexibility, student choice, and the option to take the best of two attempts. Additionally, it emphasizes the inclusion of both descriptive and objective questions, including multiple-choice formats. The policy also considers Digital Assessments, advocating for online formative and summative evaluations to equip learners with essential 21st-century skills through revamped assessment practices.

4. **TEACHER TRAINING:** The policy emphasizes the necessity of teacher training programs designed to equip educators with pedagogical strategies that promote critical thinking in students. Educators are encouraged to implement facilitative teaching approaches that stimulate inquiry, discussion, and analysis, moving away from traditional lecture-based methods. Recognizing the need for teachers to receive training in both high-quality content and pedagogy, teacher education will transition to multidisciplinary colleges and universities by 2030. The NEP 2020 is built on three foundational pillars: Quality Teacher Education (QTE), Quality in Teaching (Q-in-T), and Quality Assurance (QA) to support ongoing learning. This framework has been developed in alignment with societal needs, as the demand for knowledge in both society and the economy necessitates the continuous acquisition of new skills. Beyond having a strong grasp of their subject matter, teachers must also possess critical thinking abilities. Critical thinking involves the capacity to analyze problems or questions deeply and devise innovative solutions. This skill is vital for educators as it enables them to help their students engage critically with the concepts they are studying.
5. **FOCUS ON ADVANCED COGNITIVE SKILLS:** The NEP 2020 promotes the cultivation of advanced cognitive skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making from the early stages of education. By integrating these skills into the curriculum at all educational levels, the policy seeks to develop a generation of learners capable of critical analysis and adaptation to complex challenges across various domains. It also recommends a multidisciplinary learning approach, encouraging students to delve into a range of subjects beyond conventional ones. This strategy enhances critical thinking by presenting students with

diverse viewpoints, allowing them to evaluate and integrate information from multiple fields. Positive educational outcomes, including improved creativity and innovation, advanced critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, teamwork, communication skills, deeper learning, mastery of curricula across disciplines, and heightened social and moral awareness, have been consistently evidenced by evaluations of educational methods in undergraduate programs that merge the humanities and arts with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Institutions and educators will have the freedom to innovate in curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment within a comprehensive framework of higher education qualifications that ensures consistency across programs, institutions, and both traditional in-class and online learning environments. This will promote creativity. Consequently, curriculum and teaching strategies will be crafted by institutions and dedicated faculty to provide a stimulating and engaging learning experience for all students, with ongoing formative assessments employed to advance the objectives of each program.

6. **HOLISTIC AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION:** Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education aims to cultivate the full range of human capacities—intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral—through an integrated approach. This educational model fosters well-rounded individuals equipped with essential 21st-century skills across various domains, including the arts, humanities, languages, sciences, social sciences, and vocational fields. It emphasizes social responsibility, soft skills like communication and debate, and in-depth expertise in specific areas. To achieve this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are encouraged to implement flexible and innovative curricula that incorporate credit-bearing courses and projects focused on community service, environmental awareness, and ethical education. Ultimately, HEIs will provide students with opportunities for research internships alongside faculty and researchers from other institutions, as well as internships with local businesses and artisans. This hands-on experience enhances students' practical learning and boosts their employability.
7. **REDUCED CONTENT LOAD:** The NEP 2020 initiative aims to streamline the curriculum by focusing on essential content in each subject. This approach is designed to foster critical thinking and promote a more comprehensive learning experience through inquiry, discovery, discussion, and analysis. The proposed curriculum will prioritize key concepts, ideas, applications, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, it highlights the importance of interactive teaching methods, encouraging questions and incorporating enjoyable, creative, collaborative, and exploratory activities in the classroom to enhance experiential learning.
8. **LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION:** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of comprehensive student development, which includes acquiring essential life skills. Life skills education is deemed crucial for preparing students to face the challenges of the 21st century. Teaching methods are designed

to foster abilities such as collaboration, initiative, self-direction, discipline, teamwork, responsibility, and citizenship. Integrating sports into learning encourages students to embrace fitness as a lifelong habit while acquiring related life skills, aligning with the objectives of the Fit India Movement. Furthermore, the policy suggests creating a robust adult education curriculum framework that leverages NCERT's expertise in developing exceptional curricula for literacy, numeracy, basic education, vocational training, and more. This adult education framework will include at least five program categories: (a) basic literacy and numeracy; (b) essential life skills, covering health care, financial literacy, digital skills, commercial abilities, and family welfare; (c) vocational skill enhancement; (d) basic education, encompassing equivalency for preparatory, middle, and secondary stages; and (e) continuing education, offering comprehensive adult courses in arts, sciences, technology, culture, sports, and other relevant subjects for local learners, including advanced topics on critical life skills. The framework will recognize that adults often require different teaching and learning approaches compared to children.

- 9. ADOPTING TECHNOLOGY FOR CONTINUOUS EDUCATION:** The recent COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of online learning. Consequently, the new National Education Policy advocates for all educational institutions to utilize EdTech solutions to facilitate seamless learning and teaching. To achieve this, the policy suggests several key initiatives, including: Public Digital Infrastructure, Learning Management System/ERP Software, Virtual Labs, Digital Repositories, Extensive Distribution of Learning Materials, Teacher Participation in Content Development, Engaging Learning through Student-friendly Apps and Games, and Enhancing Current eLearning Platforms. By encouraging the integration of advanced tools and technologies in education, the Policy seeks to ensure that learning is accessible to everyone across all educational levels.

CONCLUSION: Following a thorough examination of the aforementioned provisions, it can be concluded that the NEP 2020 aims to embed critical thinking across all aspects of the educational framework to foster a culture of inquiry, analysis, and creativity. It recognizes the essential role of critical thinking in preparing students for the challenges of the twenty-first century. The NEP 2020 highlights the importance of critical thinking as an advanced cognitive skill and underscores the need to equip students with it. Instilling critical thinking skills in students is imperative, as it enables them to assess, generalize, reason, and question various relevant topics, especially those related to their personal experiences. The intention is for educators and school leaders to be convinced of the necessity of critical thinking in education, leading them to create classroom environments and opportunities that nurture the development of this vital skill.

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