

New Education Policy 2020 and the Contested Terrain of language: On Public Policy Education

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Abstract

The state of affairs in the educational sector has been causative for the evolution of various education policies at various points in time; in fact, there is no dearth of policies. Now our country is confronting NEP 2020 which provides for reforms at all levels of education from preschool to higher education. NEP 2020 proposes a balance between several binaries such as autonomy and decentralization, freedom and regulation, private and public, research and teaching, and curriculum and co-curriculum, to mention a few.

Keywords: *Education policy, India, public policy education, education reforms*

Introduction

All those who have concern for children's learning in our country are likely to get disheartened by the findings of these reports. Our education system needs fixing; it has been the case ever since independence. The state of affairs in the educational sector has been causative for the evolution of various education policies at various points in time; in fact, there is no dearth of policies. Now our country is confronting NEP 2020 which provides for reforms at all levels of education from preschool to higher education.

Education is a political phenomenon and as such its stakeholders would not be able to perceive a policy document delinking it from its political underpinning; nor are they expected to indulge in that futile exercise. Consequently, any policy document on education entails a proliferation of narratives and polemical counter-narratives. Each of these narratives has its own space in a democratic setup as a large sector of representative intelligentsia gets engaged in discussions and debates that are extremely important for the well-being of a futuristic society. It would not venture

to reflect on NEP 2020 vis-à-vis its clauses. Instead, I would like to confine my reflections to a few key areas and related issues.

The paper will be organized into three parts:

The first part will be dealing with the critical perspective on language policy. The second part will also try to look at the gap between public education policy and the people's needs through a critical lens. Finally, it will reflect on how the policy has taken pains to balance several binaries in the educational sector.

The critical perspective

The major features of the language policy discussed in the document are:

1. Introducing the three-language formula in the foundational stage and the preparatory stages; of these mother tongue and English are mandatory whereas the third language may vary from state to state
2. Acknowledging multilingualism as a boon to every learner and capitalizing on it in classroom transaction
3. Using bilingual materials in science and other subjects
4. Introduction of a course namely, Languages of India in classes 6 to 8
5. Making Sanskrit available as one of the optional languages at all levels of school and higher education.
6. Exposing the learners to literature in Sanskrit and other classical Indian languages

Children at an early stage can learn many languages as is evidenced by the ability of children living in border districts of two states where people speak different languages; this crucially depends on the input they receive. They acquire this ability without any explicit teaching. So, there is theoretical justification for introducing three languages at the foundational stage. My concern is, therefore, not about the three-language formula or the newly proposed fun course namely, Languages on India, but about the language pedagogy that will be needed for facilitating the process of learning languages. The suggestions available in the document are not in conformity with the current understanding of what language is and how it is acquired. See what the document says about the approach to language learning and teaching:

“ECCE ideally consists of flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning, comprising of alphabets, languages, numbers, counting, colors,

shapes, indoor and outdoor play, puzzles and logical thinking, problem-solving, drawing, painting and other visual art, craft, drama and puppetry, music and movement". (p. 7)

"Currently, with the lack of universal access to ECCE, a large proportion of children already fall behind within the first few weeks of Grade 1. Thus, to ensure that all students are school ready, an interim 3-month play-based 'school preparation module' for all Grade 1 students, consisting of activities and workbooks around the learning of alphabets, sounds, words, colors, shapes, and numbers, and involving collaborations with peers and parents, will be developed by NCERT and SCERTs". (p. 9)

This part of the document certainly does have a problem from the perspective of language pedagogy. Let me elaborate on this point: When we say the approach to language, it has basically to do with the conceptualization of language. The method suggested here assumes that language can be learned and taught in a linear way starting from the small linguistic units like letters /sounds and words. Ever since the emergence of the Chomskyan paradigm in linguistics, language is conceptualized as an innate system that gets unfolded in a conducive linguistic environment. According to this conceptualization, the input for the child is crucial but optimal.

The Change in the Perspective on Language

When language as a phenomenon becomes the object of inquiry, we have to choose between one of the two belief systems:

- The human mind is like an empty slate and everything related to language comes from outside.
- Man has an innate language system which gets unfolded in a natural linguistic environment.

The following theoretical assumptions on language and language can be proposed:

- Langue requires a conducive environment for its manifestation.
- Language exists only as connected speech, which I would like to call discourses. Conversations, descriptions, stories, songs, and debates are all different discourses, to name a few.
- Acquiring a language is an unconscious process.
- Language is learned in the context of discourse.

- Langue should not be considered a combination of four skills but it is a matter of how these skills can be performed.
- Langue is acquired through interacting with cultures.
- Langue learning is possible through engaging oneself in the occurrence of facts and discourse.

We cannot develop a language pedagogy overlooking these assumptions. Unfortunately, ELT as is practiced in our times confronted with serious conceptual problems which have not been properly addressed in the academic discussions in the ELT world. ELT does not have any academic credibility for the simple reason that it is not a serious discipline but an industry, perhaps an industry larger than the steel industry which has flourished globally by paving way for a market economy to decide academics. I would like to argue that “the crucial causative factor underlying the deplorable state of affairs prevailing in the English classrooms of our country is a natural consequence of certain belief systems created and sustained by institutions, agencies, and individuals through the intentional or sometimes unintentional propagation of linguistic imperialism. Unless this is prevented no matter whatever efforts we take to improve the quality of English education will have practically no effect at all”.

The issue related to the materials suggested for the foundational and the preparatory stages

A lot of interesting activities have been suggested for the foundational and preparatory stages to make classroom learning as enjoyable as possible. The thrust is on activity-based and experiential pedagogy. Theatre and music are brought in at all stages to facilitate not only language learning but the learning of other subjects as well. The use of linguistic materials like songs/rhymes, riddles, and stories is also recommended. This is all good but a question pops up. How will we help the learners make sense of the rhymes and stories and the like inputs given to her? How will make the language inputs be comprehensible? In the absence of strong language pedagogy, teachers will make the learners memorize the texts probably in an enjoyable manner. However, that is not going to facilitate language acquisition. Children may learn the texts but that won't suffice. As Krashen puts it, learning does not become acquisition. Learning is a conscious process whereas, the acquisition is a non-conscious process. This is why Chomsky says language acquisition is not something the child does but something that happens in the child's mind.

A suggestion is made in the document to use the mother tongue as concepts are best learned in the mother tongue and therefore, a bilingual approach has been suggested. I think the suggestion needs to be closely examined. Bilingualism can be interpreted at least in three ways:

Translation: The same text is presented in the target language as well as in the mother tongue.

Code mixing: Using words in the target language wherever possible where the mixing of two languages happens keeping the syntax of the mother tongue intact.

Code-switching: As a part of the narration that is presented in the mother tongue; whole expressions are used as embedded in the narration so that comprehension of the idea takes place contextually.

Of these, code-switching has been found to be very effective. I have a case to mention. In the Ernakulum district of Kerala, there are several thousands of migrant families who have come from states like Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, and even Tamilnadu. The Government of Kerala took the responsibility of educating the children of these migrant families and enrolled them in nearby Govt. schools. So, in almost all schools we find children speaking different languages. They have to learn two languages: Malayalam, which is the official language, and English. Both of these languages are second languages for them. Communication between the learners and the teachers was a near impossibility. In order to address this crisis, a special project called Roshini was launched in 18 select schools initially and then in 40 schools. I suggested the resource team use narrations using code-switching as a pedagogical tool. Some of these learners were first-generation learners and were enrolled in classes 3, 4, and even middle classes as per the provisions of the RTE Act. Volunteers who can understand their language and speak to them were appointed. Within 3 months all these children were able to speak and write the target language without any support outside the class.

The gap between policy and people's needs

The formulation of public policy on education is entrusted with a body of academic experts constituted by MHRD. Once the draft is made ready it is kept in the public domain for open discussion, SCERT, an exercise which is undertaken by SCERT's DIETs.

Each education policy since independence has laid certain milestones in visioning education. At various points in time, policy designers have tried to define and sometimes redefine, or even create, nomenclatures that do not sync with the conceptual understanding of the stakeholders. This widens the inherent gap between the decision-makers policies and the

curriculum expectations on the one hand and the needs of the people on the other.

It leads to the perspective of National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 as revised in 1992 and the Programme of Action 1992. These documents emphasized that the Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs) should be laid down and children's learning should periodically be assessed to keep a track of their progress toward achieving the NPE goal. Eventually, MLLs were developed class-wise and subject-wise for the primary stage in 1992 in the form of competencies. A decade later it was observed that the MLLs were highly product-oriented and had limited scope for assessment of the overall development of children. This demanded a radical shift when the child's capacity to construct knowledge as a natural learner was recognized as central to the transaction of the curriculum. Knowledge was conceptualized as the outcome of the learner's engagement with the world around when she explores, responds, invents, and makes meaning out of that. This implied a shift in the focus from the product to the process of learning. Accordingly, the teacher's role was redefined primarily as a facilitator of the learning process.

This is all good from the designer's point of view. But to what extent did these ideas sync with the conceptual understanding of the functionaries of agencies like SCERTs DIETs, BRC's and more importantly, the teachers and the departmental officers? The teachers by and large continued to teach the way they had been doing since the beginning of their careers. For most of them, the shift from product to process did not make any sense; for them, the textbook was synonymous with the curriculum and syllabus. Market forces undertook the production of supportive materials that contained learning outcomes in capsular form; all the students had to do was memorize the contents. Examinations continued to be textbook-based and memory-based. States that undertook partial revamping of the examination system introduced formative and summative assessments, but the formative assessment was conceived and implemented as a summative assessment. This shows that there has been always a wide gap between what has been envisaged in a certain policy document and what happens at the implementation level. We have several examples of how ambitious policies get stagnated at the implementation level. NEP 2020 has the risk of falling in line with these unimplemented policies.

Why has this happened? Why do the policies not provide for the people's needs? A major problem with these policies is that they are of a top-to-down model. The apex body has formulated the draft policy document and discussions are carried out at the SCERT's Universities, NGOs who in turn will be giving their feedback on the document. However, at no

point, space is given to the people, not intellectuals at the bottom level. The LSG's have no role in formulating the document. They are systematically excluded from all discussions.

Instead of a top-to-bottom model, why can't we think about an evolutionary model for formulating public policy?

Balancing the binaries

NEP 2020 proposes a balance between several binaries such as autonomy and decentralization, freedom and regulation, private and public, research and teaching, and curriculum and co-curriculum, to mention a few. Alongside these binaries, there is also the binary of an educational system rooted in the Western tradition of one situated in the Indian tradition. Some critics have looked at this as a saffronisation of education, or as an attempt to rejuvenate the Vedic tradition and the brahminical system. In the context of neoliberalism, all these dissenting notes are important. At the same time, it will be disastrous to indulge in academic discourses without properly understanding what these nomenclatures mean. It seeks to view that we can no longer be ignorant of our rich academic and cultural legacy; we need not feel ashamed of talking about it. What is worth accepting should not get wiped out in one sweep is counter-intuitive from the neoliberal perspective. The implications of each of these are to be viewed through a critical lens.

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