

Bridging the Gap : A Comprehensive Review of Assessment Reforms from Rote Learning to Competency-Based Evaluation under NEP 2020

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Abstract

For decades, the Indian education system has been defined by a high-stakes exam culture that often values a student's ability to memorize over their ability to understand. This "rote learning" trap has created a gap between academic grades and real-world competence. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to fundamentally bridge this gap by shifting the focus toward a competency-based evaluation model. This paper reviews the transition from traditional, memory-heavy testing to a more holistic assessment approach.

The study delves into key structural reforms, such as the introduction of the 360-degree Holistic Progress Card, which moves beyond teacher-led grading to include self and peer assessments. By analysing the practicalities of these changes, the article explores how shifting the evaluation criteria can foster critical thinking and practical application in classrooms. Furthermore, it addresses the ground-level challenges—such as teacher readiness and systemic resistance—that must be overcome to move from a certificate-driven mind set to a skill-oriented society. Ultimately, this review highlights that the success of NEP 2020 lies not just in changing how we test, but in redefining why we educate.

Keywords

- NEP 2020 (National Education Policy 2020)
- Competency-Based Evaluation
- Rote Learning
- Holistic Development
- 360-Degree Holistic Progress Card (HPC)

Introduction: The Burden of the 'Exam-First' Culture

Education is a continuous process meant to shape an individual's overall participation in society. However, in the traditional Indian context, success has often been reduced to a numerical percentage on a mark sheet. This "exam-first" culture forced students to become "memory machines," where the goal was to reproduce textbook content rather than understand its application. NEP 2020 recognizes this crisis and envisions a classroom that is flexible, inclusive, and learner-centred. By reforming how we evaluate children, the policy seeks to transform the very nature of how they learn.

Conceptual Framework and Definitions

To understand this shift, we must define the two ends of the spectrum:

Rote Learning: A process where information is memorized through repetition without a deep understanding of the underlying concepts, often for the sole purpose of passing examinations.

The Theory of Constructivism: This framework moves away from treating students as passive "memory machines". Instead, it views them as active creators of knowledge who learn best when they apply concepts to real-world situations.

Competency-Based Evaluation: An approach where students demonstrate their knowledge and skills through practical application. According to NEP 2020, this involves a shift toward testing "core capacities" rather than just content memorization.

Inclusive Education (UNESCO Definition) : "Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning... while reducing exclusion within and from education systems".

The Five Pillars of NEP 2020 in Assessment Reform

The success of transitioning from rote learning to competency-based evaluation is built upon the five foundational pillars of NEP 2020:

Access: This pillar ensures that reformed assessment tools and quality education reach every student, even in



the most remote areas of the country.

Equity: Assessment must be inclusive, offering flexible evaluation methods for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) and Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) to ensure no learner is left behind.

Quality: By shifting toward "Competency-Based Evaluation," this pillar focuses on academic rigor and deep conceptual understanding rather than simple memorization.

Affordability: Reforms aim to provide high-quality educational resources and digital assessment tools at a low cost, making holistic development accessible to all schools and families.

Accountability: Through the establishment of national bodies like PARAKH, the system ensures transparent, uniform, and standardized assessment practices across the nation.

Why the Shift is Mandatory: The Limitations of Rote Learning

The traditional assessment system has created several systemic issues:

Academic Stress: High-stakes exams lead to severe mental health issues among students.

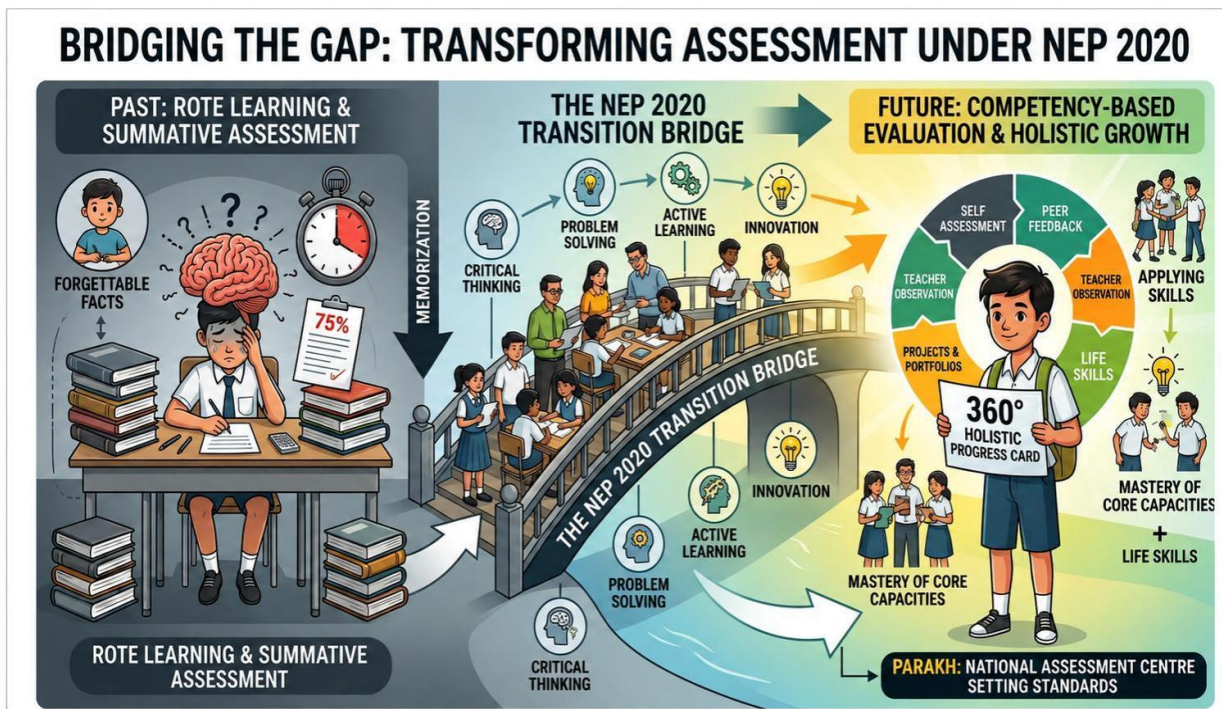
Creating "Surface Learners" Instead of Lifelong Learners:-Rote learning encourages "surface learning," where students study only to pass an exam and forget the content immediately afterward. This creates a cycle where students never truly connect with their subjects. Competency-based reforms aim to build "deep learning" habits, turning students into lifelong learners who remain curious and engaged long after they leave school.

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Coaching Culture: The focus on rote-based board exams has led to a multi-billion dollar coaching industry that prioritizes “tricks” over “learning”.

Digital and Global Irrelevance:- In the age of the internet and AI, facts are available at the click of a button. Therefore, testing a student’s ability to store facts is becoming obsolete. What the 21st century requires is the ability to filter, analyze, and synthesize information—skills that rote learning completely ignores. The shift is mandatory to ensure Indian students remain relevant and competitive in a global, technology-driven economy.



Bias Toward Memory Over Intelligence:- One of the biggest flaws of rote-based assessment is that it assumes memory is the only measure of a student’s potential. This is unfair to students who may be brilliant at logic, art, or social leadership but struggle with memorizing long texts. The shift is mandatory to create a fairer system that recognizes diverse forms of intelligence and talents.

Skill Mismatch: Graduates often possess high marks but lack the critical thinking and problem-solving skills required for higher education and the workforce.

Key Assessment Reforms under NEP 2020

The policy introduces several revolutionary tools to replace traditional report cards:

A. The 360-Degree Holistic Progress Card (HPC)

NEP 2020 proposes a multi-dimensional report card that tracks progress in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

Self-Assessment: Students reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses.

Peer Assessment: Classmates provide feedback, fostering social skills and teamwork.

Teacher Assessment: Continuous observation rather than a single end-of-year judgment.

B. Moving from Summative to Formative Assessment

Instead of judging a student based on one 3-hour exam (Summative), the policy encourages "Assessment for Learning" (Formative). This involves regular, low-stakes quizzes, projects, and portfolios that provide immediate feedback to the learner.

C. PARAKH: Setting the Standards

The establishment of PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) as a national center will ensure that assessment standards are uniform and focused on 21st-century skills.

Implementation in Secondary Education

At the secondary level, the demands for academic rigor are high. NEP 2020 suggests:

Flexible Board Exams: Students can choose subjects and even the level of difficulty, reducing the "fear" of exams.

Digital Integration: Using AI-based software to track learning trajectories and provide personalized support.

Support for Diverse Learners: Tailoring assessments for Gifted Learners, CWSN (Children with Special Needs), and SEDGs (Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups).

The Policy-Practice Gap: Critical Analysis

Despite the progressive vision, research (e.g., Sharma & Singh, 2022) indicates several hurdles:

Teacher Readiness: Many teachers lack training in "Differentiated Instruction" and still rely on traditional lecture methods.

Resource Constraints: Large class sizes and limited digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, make individual tracking difficult.

Exam-Oriented Mindset: Parents and institutions still view competitive exam results as the only valid measure of success.

Suggestions for a Successful Transition

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, the following steps are recommended:

Continuous Professional Development: Regular in-service training for teachers focused on inclusive pedagogy and modern assessment tools.

Parental Engagement: Awareness programs to shift the focus from marks to holistic skills.

Infrastructural Support: Ensuring schools have the necessary ICT tools and assistive devices for CWSN.

Curriculum Alignment: Reducing the content load to allow time for activity-based and inquiry-based learning.

Conclusion

The shift from rote learning to competency-based evaluation under NEP 2020 is not just a structural change; it is a fundamental rebirth of India's educational soul. For decades, our schools have functioned as "memory factories," where a student's worth was unfairly reduced to a numerical percentage on a mark sheet. By moving away from this high-stakes exam culture, the policy finally recognizes that true learning happens when a student understands the "why" and "how" behind a concept, rather than just the "what".

The introduction of revolutionary tools like the 360-degree Holistic Progress Card (HPC) and the PARAKH framework signals a move toward valuing the whole child. Assessment is no longer just a teacher's final judgment at the end of the year; it has become a continuous journey involving self-reflection and peer feedback. However, the road ahead is not without obstacles. Bridging the gap between a visionary policy and classroom reality requires tackling deep-rooted issues like teacher readiness, resource shortages in rural areas, and the obsession parents often have with board exam scores.

Ultimately, the success of these reforms depends on our collective ability to value "how to think" over "what to think". If we provide teachers with the right training and schools with the necessary infrastructure, we can move away from a certificate-driven mind set toward a truly skill-oriented society. NEP 2020 provides the roadmap, but its true achievement will be measured by how well we prepare the next generation to face the complex, unpredictable challenges of the 21st century.

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