



## **PSYCHOLOGY OF LEARNING: Examining Holistic Development in India's National Education Policy 2020 through Major Psychological Theories**

**Chahat Kushwaha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Rajesh Kumar<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>PGT Psychology and School Counsellor, Krishna Public School, Raipur

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Regional Institute of Education (NCERT), Bhopal

### **Abstract**

Education is no longer confined to cognitive advancement alone; it now encompasses emotional, social, ethical, physical, and cultural dimensions. Holistic development has become a central discourse in global educational reforms, linking pedagogy with psychology and lifelong learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India articulates a transformative vision, advocating for experiential learning, art-integration, multilingualism, value-based education, and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This paper critically examines the significance of holistic development, situating it within psychological theories and global initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4). Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Piaget, Bruner, Gesell, Vygotsky, Erikson, Gardner, Bronfenbrenner, Bandura, Kohlberg, Maslow and Delors, alongside contemporary policy directions, this paper provides meta synthesis of the philosophical foundations, practical applications, and challenges of implementing holistic education described in NEP 2020. It argues that fostering holistic development is essential for cultivating creative, ethical, and globally competent citizens. However, achieving this goal demands systemic reforms, teacher preparedness, parental involvement, and contextual adaptation.

### **Keywords**

Holistic Development; National Education Policy 2020; Experiential Learning; Psychology of Learning.

### **Introduction**

Education is universally recognized as the cornerstone of human development. It equips individuals not only with knowledge and skills but also with the values, dispositions, and resilience necessary to thrive in complex societies. Traditional systems have historically privileged academic achievement and rote memorization, often neglecting emotional, ethical, and social dimensions of learning. The present generation known as generation Z and generation Alpha

requires more than just cognitive development through education. The paradigm of holistic development integrates multiple facets of human growth—cognitive, emotional, physical, social, artistic, and spiritual—ensuring that learners become well-rounded individuals. In India, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is the reform that has the potential to reorient education towards multidisciplinary, inclusive, and holistic growth of learners. The policy echoes international frameworks, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education), and theoretical foundations laid by psychologists like Piaget, Bruner, Gesell, Vygotsky, Erikson, Gardner, Bronfenbrenner, Bandura, Kohlberg, Maslow and Delors, regarding learning and all-round development. This paper explores holistic development with a special focus on NEP 2020 and psychological theories. It discusses the theoretical background, policy provisions, classroom strategies, challenges, and the broader implications of holistic education for 21st-century learners.

### **Need and Significance of the paper**

This paper will be providing more understandable connection between NEP 2020 and various psychological theories. Existing literature has examined NEP 2020 and holistic development independently. However, limited studies have systematically synthesized provisions of NEP 2020 with major psychological theories to explain how the policy supports holistic development. This study attempts to bridge this gap through a qualitative meta-synthesis and policy analysis approach.

### **Operational Definition of the Key Words**

**Holistic development:** Development of children in physical, emotional, social, moral, intellectual, and cultural dimensions.

**Experiential Learning:** The process where learning takes place through exposure to real life experiences.

**Psychology of Learning:** How people acquire, process, retain, and apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours through experience, teaching, and interaction with the environment.

### **Objective/Purpose of the Paper**

1. To examine the concept and significance of holistic development in education.
2. To analyze provisions of NEP 2020 promoting holistic development.
3. To examine the relationship between major psychological theories and NEP 2020.
4. To identify challenges in implementing holistic education.
5. To intensify the significance of holistic development in education for coming generation along with providing explanation for psychological factors involved in it.

### **Delimitations**

1. The study focuses on the Indian educational context only, particularly the framework established by NEP 2020, and does not compare educational policies of other countries.

2. The paper examines theoretical linkages between psychological theories and policy objectives, without evaluating the actual implementation or effectiveness of NEP 2020 in schools.
3. The study is limited to the analysis of the provisions of NEP 2020 related to holistic development only. Other dimensions of the policy such as higher education reforms, governance structures, funding mechanisms, and vocational policies are not included.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis design using Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and policy analysis. Literature was collected from Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, NCERT reports, UNESCO publications, and government policy documents. Keywords including *Holistic Development*, *NEP 2020*, *Educational Psychology*, *Experiential Learning*, *Developmental Psychology Theories* and *Learning Theories* were used. Sources were selected based on relevance to holistic education and psychological foundations. The synthesized findings were organized into thematic categories corresponding to study object

### **Meta Synthesis according to objectives**

India is a developing nation with largest population catering large percentage of world youth. The youth requires the education which can equip them with skills to match the world. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) defines holistic development as the all-round growth of children in physical, emotional, social, moral, intellectual, and cultural dimensions. Similarly, UNESCO (Delors, 1996) highlighted four pillars of learning—learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be—that underpin quality education in the 21st century. NEP 2020 caters all the above-mentioned concepts by inculcating concept of holistic development. Holistic education emphasizes Integration of knowledge with values and life skills, Balance between academics and co-curricular activities, Promotion of creativity, empathy, resilience, and global citizenship.

Psychology offers robust insights into why holistic development is indispensable. The theories given by various psychologists combined together, form the definition of holistic development.

Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory simply expresses how an individual can be intelligent even if they are not good at rote learning which implies, that in order to make a learner reach its true potential who is musically intelligent which means that the individual has sensitivity to rhythm, melody, and sound for instance, an education system which provides the stage to such individuals to hone their skills is needed rather than an education system that promotes rote memorisation. Similar stance goes for all the other types of intelligence that Gardner has presented i.e. Linguistic Intelligence, Logical–Mathematical Intelligence, Spatial Intelligence, Bodily–Kinesthetic Intelligence, Interpersonal Intelligence, Intrapersonal Intelligence, Naturalistic Intelligence and Existential Intelligence. Many of these types of intelligence are unconventional for traditional education system.

Arnold Gesell's Maturation Theory of Development explains that child development occurs naturally according to an inborn biological timetable. According to Gesell, growth and behaviour develop in a fixed sequence as the nervous system matures. Gesell strongly believed that Physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth are interconnected.

Jerome Bruner's theory of cognitive development explains how children learn through active interaction with their environment. Bruner believed learning is a process of discovery and that cognitive growth occurs through different ways of representing knowledge (Three Modes of Representation; Enactive Stage, Iconic Stage and Symbolic Stage).

Jean Piaget proposed the Theory of Cognitive Development (Constructivism), which states that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment rather than passively receiving information. He suggested that cognitive development progresses through four universal stages: the Sensorimotor stage, where learning occurs through sensory and motor experiences; the Preoperational stage, characterized by symbolic thinking and language development; the Concrete Operational stage, where logical thinking about concrete situations develops; and the Formal Operational stage, which enables abstract and hypothetical reasoning. In his theory, under first milestone of development (Preoperational Stage) signifies the connection of cognitive development with physical development by explaining how the child understands the world around them by touching, walking, looking and holding objects that are present in their environment.

Another theory which is also given by Piaget on moral development signifies how the moral development in child takes place from heteronomous morality, where children perceive rules as fixed and imposed by authority figures, to autonomous morality, where they begin to understand that rules can be modified through cooperation and mutual understanding. This transition occurs through cognitive growth and social interactions with peers and adults. Through this theory the connection between cognitive development and role of social interaction in cognitive development is explained. The policy's emphasis on play-based learning, experiential pedagogy, competency-based education, and child-centered teaching approaches reflects Piaget's constructivist principles.

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory underscores the role of language, culture, and guided participation in learning. Vygotsky believed that learning is fundamentally a social process where children acquire knowledge through interactions with more knowledgeable others such as parents, teachers, peers, and community members. According to him the cognitive development does not occur in isolation, Children develop their thinking abilities within a cultural context where language, customs, values, and social practices shape the way they understand the world. Therefore, learning and development are interconnected and occur through participation in meaningful cultural experiences. In his theory the importance of social interaction in cognitive development is emphasized.

Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed the Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development, which explains that a child's development is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the multiple environmental systems (Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem) surrounding the child. According to Bronfenbrenner, development occurs through continuous interactions between the individual and different layers of the environment, ranging from immediate family relationships to broader cultural and societal influences.

Albert Bandura proposed the Social Learning Theory, which explains that learning occurs not only through direct experience and reinforcement but also through observation, imitation, and interaction with others. Bandura argued that individuals can acquire new behaviours, attitudes, values, and skills simply by observing the actions of other people and the consequences of those actions.

Theory of Moral Development proposed by Kohlberg, explains that moral reasoning develops progressively through a sequence of stages as individuals mature and gain social experiences. Building on Piaget's ideas, Kohlberg argued that morality is not simply learned through rules and rewards but develops through increasingly sophisticated reasoning about justice and ethical issues. He proposed three levels and six stages of moral development: the Pre-conventional Level, where decisions are guided by punishment avoidance and personal benefit; the Conventional Level, where individuals follow social norms, seek approval, and maintain social order; and the Post-conventional Level, where moral reasoning is based on individual rights, justice, and universal ethical principles. Kohlberg emphasized that education should promote ethical thinking, empathy, and responsible decision-making, thereby contributing to the broader goal of holistic development.

Erik Erikson proposed that for healthy personality development, an individual has to go through eight developmental stages (Psychosocial Theory of Development) across the lifespan, where in each stage the individual has to go through developmental crisis. The first stage, Trust vs. Mistrust (birth–1 year), focuses on developing trust through consistent care and support. The second stage, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (1–3 years), involves developing independence and self-control. During Initiative vs. Guilt (3–6 years), children begin taking initiative and exploring their environment. The fourth stage, Industry vs. Inferiority (6–12 years), emphasizes competence and achievement through school and social activities. In Identity vs. Role Confusion (12–18 years), adolescents explore personal identity and self-concept. The sixth stage, Intimacy vs. Isolation (young adulthood), involves forming meaningful relationships, followed by Generativity vs. Stagnation (middle adulthood), which focuses on contributing to society and future generations. The final stage, Integrity vs. Despair (late adulthood), involves reflecting on life with a sense of satisfaction or regret. Erikson emphasized that successful resolution of these stages contributes to emotional well-being, social competence, and healthy personality development across life. His theory supports the Emotional development part of the holistic development which

is crucial and significant part of the overall development of the individual. It is needless to say educating and making youth emotionally intelligent is necessary.

Abraham Maslow explained emotional development through his Hierarchy of Needs Theory. He believed that healthy emotional growth happens when human needs are fulfilled step by step (Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love and Belongingness Needs, Esteem Needs and Self-Actualization Needs. His theory talks about the importance of emotional development as significant part of overall development.

Combining the essence of all the theories together; all the facets of holistic development are intertwined. Holistic development cannot be achieved by implementing these theories individually. Together, these theories formulate ideal definition of holistic development. As beautifully put together by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, “Learning by head, hand and heart” show that education must nurture the whole child rather than focus solely on academics.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 integrates psychological principles, pedagogical innovations, and multidisciplinary perspectives to ensure the effective growth of learners. It recognizes that education should support not only intellectual development but also emotional, social, ethical, cultural, and physical well-being. The NEP 2020 promotes holistic development through following provisions:

### **1. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE):**

NEP 2020 recognizes the foundational years (3–8 years) as a critical period for cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic development. Research in developmental psychology conducted by Piaget and Gesell suggests that early experiences significantly shape future learning outcomes and personality development. Therefore, the policy advocates play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-driven learning approaches during the foundational stage. Activities such as storytelling, games, art, music, and exploration encourage children to develop curiosity, imagination, communication skills, and emotional regulation. The ECCE supports holistic development by nurturing multidimensional knowledge that will result in nurturing multidimensional intelligence from an early age as discussed by Gardner.

### **2. Multidisciplinary Education**

Traditional educational systems used to separate disciplines into rigid categories. NEP 2020 challenges this approach by promoting multidisciplinary and flexible learning pathways. Students can now combine subjects from arts, sciences, vocational education, sports, and humanities according to their interests and abilities. Such flexibility recognizes individual differences and diverse talents among learners. Multidisciplinary learning enables students to understand real-world issues from multiple perspectives and fosters creativity, innovation, and critical thinking. The policy promotes balanced intellectual and personal development by eliminating strict boundaries between academic streams.

### **3. Experiential Learning and Art Integration**

One of the central principles of NEP 2020 is the promotion of experiential learning, where students actively participate in learning rather than passively receiving information. Activity-based teaching, project work, experimentation, field experiences, and problem-solving tasks are emphasized to facilitate meaningful understanding. The policy also incorporates art integration and sports integration as pedagogical strategies rather than treating them as extracurricular activities as arts and sports contribute to emotional expression, creativity, teamwork, confidence, and physical well-being.

#### **4. Language Policy**

As advocated by Piaget language development contributes vastly in cognitive development, and as proposed by Erikson, language also plays vital role in identity formation. Gardner has classified Linguistic Intelligence as a different type of intelligence. These stances together signify the importance of language. With similar emphasis NEP 2020 introduces the three-language formula, encouraging learners to receive foundational education in their mother tongue or regional language whenever possible. As research conducted by Benson (2004), Kathleen Heuge (2006), Trudell (2007), Jessica Ball (2011) and UNESCO (1953, 2016) suggests that children learn concepts more effectively when taught in familiar languages during early years. Simultaneously, multilingual education develops communication skills, cultural understanding, and cognitive flexibility. Exposure to multiple languages also enhances appreciation for diversity and strengthens cultural identity while preparing learners to engage within global contexts (Fan, Liberman, Keysar & Kinzler; 2015). Therefore, language education under NEP 2020 contributes toward intellectual and socio-cultural development. This will directly enhance interdisciplinary exposure and aid cultural development advocated by Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner.

#### **5. Value and Moral Education**

NEP 2020 emphasizes the integration of values such as empathy, compassion, respect, constitutional values, environmental consciousness, and responsible citizenship within educational practices. Contemporary societies face challenges including intolerance, environmental crises, and social conflict, making moral and value education increasingly significant. By enhancing emphasis on value and moral education, NEP 2020 contributes toward the development of responsible citizens capable of contributing positively to society. Thus, value education becomes an important component of holistic development.

#### **6. Development of 21st-Century Skills**

Globalization has transformed the competencies required in contemporary society, recognizing these changes, NEP 2020 integrates 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, digital literacy, coding, artificial intelligence, and problem-solving into school education. Modern contexts require adaptability and innovation; the inclusion of these competencies prepares learners for

future educational and occupational demands. Such skills support not only academic success but also social participation and lifelong learning.

## **7. Teacher Empowerment and Parental Role**

The successful implementation of educational reform depends significantly upon effective collaboration of all stakeholders among which teachers and parents play the most important role. NEP 2020 recognizes teachers as facilitators of learning and emphasizes continuous professional development, pedagogical training, and autonomy in teaching practices. Teachers are expected to create inclusive and learner-centered environments that support individual needs and interests. Simultaneously, the policy highlights the importance of parental participation in children's educational experiences. Parents provide emotional support, motivation, and learning opportunities beyond school environments. Collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities contribute toward creating supportive ecosystems essential for holistic development.

### **Challenges in Implementation**

Despite its progressive vision, implementing holistic education under NEP 2020 presents several practical challenges. Many schools, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, continue to face shortages of infrastructure, technology, libraries, laboratories, sports facilities, and trained personnel. Holistic approaches require supportive environments that facilitate experiential learning, arts integration, and technology use. Resource limitations may therefore restrict effective implementation. Teachers accustomed to traditional instructional methods may require extensive reorientation and professional training to adopt learner-centered and multidisciplinary pedagogies. Effective implementation depends upon teachers understanding and applying experiential and inclusive teaching practices. Many parents continue to evaluate educational success primarily through examination scores and competitive performance. Such expectations may conflict with broader goals of holistic development, creativity, and socio-emotional learning promoted by NEP 2020. Although NEP advocates competency-based evaluation, existing assessment systems frequently emphasize memorization and standardized examinations. This creates inconsistencies between educational goals and assessment practices. Socioeconomic inequalities remain a major challenge in educational access and opportunities. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience barriers related to nutrition, digital access, healthcare, and stimulating learning environments, which can negatively influence developmental outcomes. Addressing such inequalities remains necessary for ensuring equitable holistic development opportunities for all learners.

### **Discussion**

The push for holistic development under NEP 2020 reflects a global educational shift towards producing adaptive, innovative, and responsible citizens. By integrating psychological insights and cultural contexts, education can move beyond information transfer to character formation and skill development. However, the transition requires systemic alignment. Policymakers must

balance academic rigor with co-scholastic activities, schools must adapt curriculum frameworks, teachers must adopt inclusive pedagogy, and parents must embrace broader goals of education. The challenge is to ensure that holistic development is not merely inspirational rhetoric but a lived reality across classrooms.

### Conclusion

Holistic development is both a philosophical vision and a practical necessity in contemporary education. NEP 2020, grounded in psychology provides a robust framework for integrating multidisciplinary, experiential learning, multilingualism, and value education. If effectively implemented, it can transform India's educational landscape, nurturing individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also ethical, empathetic, and globally competent. Yet, implementation challenges must be addressed through investment in teacher training, curriculum innovation, parental involvement, and systemic reforms. Only then can education fulfil its promise of producing well-rounded citizens equipped for the demands of the 21st century.

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