

Innovative Practices and Experiments at Foundational and Preparatory Stage: NEP 2020 Perspective

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the innovative practices and experiments at the foundational and preparatory stage with special reference to National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). Following a qualitative approach, and drawing insights from policy analysis, this paper also employs document analysis to connect the concrete evidence and outcomes of innovative projects submitted under an innovative program of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) i.e., "Promoting Innovative Practices and Experiments in Education for Schools and Teacher Education Institutions." The study analyses 25 projects undertaken at the foundational and preparatory stages over a period that includes the COVID-19 affected year (2019–20) as well as the post-pandemic (2021–22 to 2024–25) period known for learning challenges. In addition to this study the selected field-level insights (2025–26) were incorporated through classroom observations and student feedback to provide a limited ground-level perspective. The findings indicate a significant shift towards FLN (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy)- focused, play-based, context-responsive, and technology-supported innovations, broadly aligning with the priorities outlined in NEP 2020 and the pedagogical orientation of NCF-FS 2022. This study emphasised that structured innovation programmes, supported by enabling policy frameworks, can facilitate teachers in designing, implementing, and sustaining meaningful classroom practices at the early stages of schooling.

Keywords: Innovative practices and experiments, NEP 2020, FLN, qualitative approach

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Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions the promotion of innovation as a key driver for transforming school education. It recognises educational innovation as an important pathway to address persistent challenges in teaching–learning processes and to strengthen the overall quality of education, even within existing resource constraints. The policy places teachers at the centre of this transformation, encouraging them to design and implement context-specific practices that can make learning more meaningful and effective.

Emphasizing classroom innovations, where the teacher guides the transaction process, developmental concerns are dealt effectively, extended from the teaching-learning to the global innovative practices. The concept of experimentation can also be practiced in regular classroom behaviour as a transformational shift from the earlier. True experimentation in a science lab may have limited application for the classroom as laboratory, but the 'cause and effect' relationship, objectivity, rationality, unbiased hypothesizing, structural designs, rigorous effort for fact finding, commitment to the planned strategies etc. lead to the experimentation practiced by a teacher for a vibrant classroom with empowered learners.

In classroom contexts, innovation may be understood not only as large-scale interventions but also as reflective and systematic experimentation within everyday teaching–learning processes. While formal experimentation in controlled settings may not always be feasible in schools, elements such as planned strategies, observation, responsiveness to learners, and reflective practice contribute meaningfully to classroom innovation. Such approaches allow teachers to adapt pedagogy according to learners’ needs, especially in diverse and resource-varied settings.

The early stages of education are particularly crucial, as they lay the foundation for cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. NEP 2020 restructures school education into a 5+3+3+4 design, where the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8, including pre-school and Grades 1–2) and the Preparatory Stage (ages 8–11, Grades 3–5) together form the base for all subsequent learning. These stages emphasise play-based, activity-oriented, and experiential learning, moving away from rote-based approaches and focusing on the holistic development of the child.

Foundational and Preparatory Stage conceived as a continuum where early language and numeracy are developed through play, activity, and discovery rather than rote learning. These two early stages are exclusively selected for the study which are replacing the earlier pre-primary/pre-nursery to LKG i.e., prior to class 1 and primary level from class 1-5. The earlier levels were equivalent to the foundational and preparatory stages as far as innovative practices and experiments selected under a national level program of the present study are concerned. Therefore, the study is all inclusive for selecting the projects using either of these terminologies. Hence, NCERT’s programme “Promoting Innovative Practices and Experiments in Education for Schools and Teacher Education Institutions” aims to sensitise and support teachers and teacher educators to undertake classroom-based innovations, including in FLN, and to document and disseminate effective practices.

Programme structure and policy alignment

A flagship programme of NCERT on educational innovation has been running since the early sixties which aims to identify, support, and scale up grassroots innovations by school teachers and teacher educators to improve the quality of education. NEP 2020 also envisions education to innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in novel and changing fields (NEP 2020 final Draft, p.3). National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 (p.38 & 106) and National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 (p.26, 32, 115, 462 & 599) directly address the need for innovations in education by recommending the best practices of innovative teaching, pedagogy, course designing and learning material. NEP 2020 (p.41) highlighted the importance of promoting innovative practices in education through motivation and incentivization, while underpinning teachers being given continuous opportunities for self-improvement and to learn the latest innovations and advances in their professions. In this context, from 2023-24 onwards, the programme is renamed as “Promoting Innovative Practices and Experiments in Education for Schools and Teacher Education Institutions”.

Furthermore, NEP 2020 (para 4.10, p.13) states that innovative methods may lead to the flexibility and exposure to and enjoyment of a wider range of subjects, including across the arts, sciences, humanities, languages, sports, and vocational subjects. With the similar objectives across all subjects, this scheme is committed to sensitize teachers and teacher educators about the potential of innovative practices and experiments for improvement of teaching learning, identify problems, finding solutions create a sustainable learning environment and to provide forum to share their innovative ideas with all stakeholders.

The Department of Teacher Education (DTE), NCERT coordinates the programme which runs with specific timeline and defined norms. Proposal and reporting formats are well designed and regularly validated by the experts under the programme. Usually, proposals are called for submission in the respective Regional Institute of Education (RIEs) of NCERT with a deadline of April- July end every year. Two-level evaluation of the proposals makes it unbiased and transparent- first at the RIE level then at DTE, NCERT. Major strengths of the programme includes barrier free all-inclusive access for the teachers/teacher educators to submit their innovative proposals; like, open to all call for proposal webpage, communicating to all state/national apex bodies for school/teacher education, removing language barrier and allowing the entry even in mother tongue medium,

focusing on innovation irrespective of subject or stage etc. Resource persons from DTE, NCERT provide academic guidance and visit the school/institution for on-the-spot observation of the process of innovation. The visit is organized during the execution of the innovative project. The cycle of a year of this programme ends with the submission of the report of presentation in the National Seminar, conducted every year in the month of May-June and certification with distribution of seed money after evaluating the report and presentation of each innovative project.

Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted in the field of educational innovation but comparatively less at the foundational and preparatory stage and rare studies showing exact proximity to the present one; based on such a project. Even so, few studies can support the need of the present study due to their academic and procedural gap.

Maria (2024) research was focused on highlighting the creative elements of the awarded projects and the factors that contribute to the dissemination and integration of educational innovations into school practices. The analysis of 11 educational innovation projects implemented in primary schools highlights the possibilities and obstacles of incorporating new approaches within the Greek educational system. Further, the study discusses, a few challenges about systematic support with the need of emphasis on sustainable practices. It also provides an interface between the systematic programme structure for sustainable practices of educational innovation and the outcomes at grassroot level with an analysis of their alignment with NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022.

Panda & Basantia (2008) explained why the teaching-learning strategy needs to be changed in accordance with the change in situation/endeavour, change in time, change in learners' needs, change in demands of the society and change in philosophy of the country. For this, they suggest that the teaching learning approach must be learner-friendly, flexible, innovative and eclectic in nature. Further clarified that a new and innovative teaching-learning strategy, i.e., multi-dimensional, activity based, integrated approach, may have wide implications for achieving the broad-based objectives in different areas of teaching-learning with respect to attaining multisided development among the learners.

In order to provide a pan-India platform teachers and teacher educators from diverse backgrounds and dealing with extreme diversity of India at their schools. The diverse nature of projects about changing the strategy has been covered in the study. Further, it comes with authentic data of the final reports from the educational innovators across the country who have submitted the proposal first, then executed their innovations at the grassroot level.

In the field of EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching; Lakew, Yigzaw & Simegn (2025) found that many Ethiopian primary school teachers struggle to implement innovative teaching strategies. Their study explored how English teachers approach instruction and found a lack of modern methods such as cooperative learning, task-based learning and technology integration. Teachers faced multiple challenges, including low salaries, limited resources and restrictive school leadership, which contributed to their reluctance to adopt new strategies. As a result, students may not receive the best possible English language education. Addressing these issues through better support, professional development, and improved working conditions could enhance teaching effectiveness.

Thus, innovative practices of India have been recognised not only at national but also at international level. But the country's innovation or even the innovation; as its basic nature suggests, cannot be attributed to an organisation only. However, it may be justified for a case study like above. For a big country like India, data needs for various such cases of school education like that of remote village/metropolitan, terrain/plane and with other diverse features.

Need of the study

NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 provide a comprehensive policy and curricular framework for strengthening FLN. There remains a need to examine how FLN has emerged as a critical domain that influences learners' progress

across all subsequent stages of education. These policy directions are required to be interpreted and enacted by teachers in actual classroom settings.

Innovation projects implemented offers an opportunity to understand the nature, diversity, and emerging patterns of such practices at the foundational and preparatory stages. It also enables an exploration of how policy intentions are translated into practical pedagogical strategies and how these innovations respond to diverse classroom realities across different contexts.

Therefore this study is timely and important for identifying promising practices, understanding their alignment with policy priorities, and generating insights that may inform future efforts aimed at strengthening FLN implemented under NCERT.

Research objectives

The study consists the following research objectives at the foundational and preparatory stage.

1. To identify the themes of FLN priority areas as advocated by NEP 2020/NCF-FS 2022.
2. To present a thematic profile of the projects.
3. To analyse the representation of FLN priority areas.
4. To analyse the trend of innovation at the stage.

Research methodology

Design: The research design of the study is descriptive and to study the trend thematic analysis was used was a method under broader category of qualitative research. The foundational and preparatory stages in this study were thematically coded under broad FLN domains and then interpreted in the light of NEP 2020 and NCF FS 2022. Reports of selected innovative projects in the field of FLN at both stages of last five years were taken as samples. The study implemented their proposed innovations for 05 months. Further, the reports were chosen on how it was practised or experimented at the foundational/ preparatory stage. 25 projects at the Foundational and Preparatory Stage over five cycles as illustrated in table 1 from 2019 - 2025. The following table represents total number of projects submitted under the programme. Thus, within this programme the representation for FLN based projects for both foundational and preparatory stages are ranged between 16 to 33 out of total annual project counts.

Table 1: Number of projects submitted under the programme

STAGE	Cycle 5 2024-25	Cycle 4 2023-24	Cycle 3 2022-23	Cycle 2 2020-22/ 2021-22	Cycle 1 2019-20
Foundational + Preparatory Stage	06	07	09	03	01
Total Number of Projects	26	33	26	16	29

*Selected projects were included before NEP 2020 covered both (foundational and preparatory) the stages pertaining to the year 2019-2020.

Analysis and Interpretation

NCERT's innovation programme and FLN focus

The project titles indicate an increasing explicit focus on FLN, particularly from 2020-22 onwards, aligning with the policy emphasis on FLN and the rollout of NIPUN Bharat and NCF-FS 2022.

Identified themes under NEP 2020/NCF-FS 2022

FLN priority areas of NEP 2020/NCF-FS 2022 were mapped with the projects submitted under the programme at foundational and preparatory stage. Following 13 themes were found emerging from the submitted projects under the policy and framework:

1. Multilingualism (Foreign/ Local Language Development)
2. Basic Mathematical and Financial Operations
3. Play-, Toy-, Story- based Joyful Learning
4. Experiential Learning
5. Inclusive Pedagogy (e.g.- Lingual Diversity, Gender Inclusion etc.)
6. Art Integrated Learning
7. ICT Integration
8. IKS (includes using indigenous resources) Integration
9. Assessment integration
10. Competency-based Learning
11. Collaborative Learning (e.g. Peer Group Supported Learning)
12. Problem Solving Approach
13. Contextual Learning (e.g.- using Local/Cultural features)

Policy vision for FLN and innovation

NCF-FS 2022 operationalises the policy vision by placing the above themes at the centre of curriculum organisation, pedagogy, time, content organisation for the overall experience of the child at the Foundational Stage. It highlights supervised play-based education, in groups and individually. This is crucial for developing curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, cooperation, and teamwork. Also, building early literacy and numeracy through songs, stories, games, puzzles, manipulatives, and everyday experiences. The framework articulates specific learning outcomes and strategies for FLN, emphasising that reading, writing, and number sense should grow out of meaningful, joyful engagement rather than isolated drill.

Thematic profile of FLN innovations

Across the five years, the foundational and preparatory projects reflect a rich diversity of FLN-related innovations. Early projects in 2019-20 include activity-based learning (e.g., “Snakes and Ladders” for Class I), which foreshadow NEP 2020’s integrated, experiential approach even before the policy’s full implementation. During 2020-22/2021-22, projects such as “Math’s Phobia now no more”, “Creating alphabetic zoo in the classroom”, and “Developing Reading and Writing Skills at Preparatory Stage”, explicitly combine subject content with creative, technology-aided, and multidisciplinary strategies that resonate with NEP 2020’s call for joyful, flexible, and integrated learning experiences.

In 2022-23, there is a noticeable expansion of FLN-specific innovations. Projects such as “Effectiveness of GKA Kit in Developing the Addition in the Student of Class-03 in FLN (Numeracy)”, “Learning of Mathematics through Activities”, “Mathematics Floor Games”, and “Using the Ancient Technique of Abacus to Develop Mathematical Intelligence in Tribal Students” demonstrate a clear focus on concept-based, and activity-oriented numeracy in line with NCF-FS 2022’s guidance on developing number sense, operations, and spatial awareness through games and manipulatives. Simultaneously, language-oriented projects such as “Language Education through Illustrated Children’s Stories”, “Diagrammatic Learning – A Budding Concept for Comprehensive Reading in Primary Classes”, and a Hindi project on art-integrated education for enhancing FLN competencies show alignment with the framework’s emphasis on rich language environments, multimodal texts, and art-integrated learning.

The 2023-24 cycle includes projects that integrate Social Emotional Learning with English literacy, use indigenous toys and play-based pedagogy to assess numeracy, develop numeracy skills using indigenous games, and focus on

linguistic proficiency through tailored teaching-learning materials, all of which mirror NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022's insistence on local materials, cultural relevance, and holistic development. There are also projects addressing professional sensitivity in supervising FLN implementation, reflecting an emerging concern with instructional leadership and monitoring in FLN initiatives. In 2024-25, projects such as "Use of Supplementary Educational Games and Tools for Development of Language Skills of Children in Foundational Stage", "Interactive Story Books: Enhancing English Learning through Creativity and Technology", "Developing Interactive e-Content for Foundational Numeracy under NIPUN Bharat Program", and an Odia pronunciation intervention using the GRR model show deepening engagement with technology-enabled, higher-order, and multilingual aspects of FLN.

Representation of FLN priority areas

The coding decoding strategy was applied to analyse the representation. The themes identified in the study were coded for each selected project of the study. The percentage of represented themes were calculated for the projects. It was found that all the projects representing more than one theme and few themes are integrated with every project. Following table followed by the graph shows overall representation of the identified themes:

Table 2: Representation of identified themes

S.No	Themes Aligned with NEP 2020 / NCF-FS 2022	Total Cumulative Occurrences	Percentage Contribution (% out of 25) *
1	Multilingualism (Foreign/ Local Language Development)	12	48.00%
2	Basic Mathematical and Financial Operations	11	44.00%
3	Play-, Toy-, Story- based Joyful Learning	16	64.00%
4	Experiential Learning	17	68.00%
5	Inclusive Pedagogy (e.g.- Lingual Diversity, Gender Inclusion etc.)	2	8.00%
6	Art Integrated Learning	9	36.00%
7	ICT Integration	9	36.00%
8	IKS (includes using indigenous resources) Integration	11	44.00%
9	Assessment integration	25	100.00%
10	Competency-based Learning	25	100.00%
11	Collaborative Learning (e.g. Peer Group Supported Learning)	12	48.00%
12	Problem Solving Approach	11	44.00%
13	Contextual Learning (e.g.- using Local/Cultural features)	17	68.00%
Note: Individual projects map onto multiple intersections simultaneously, which is why individual percentages do not add up to 100% cumulatively.			

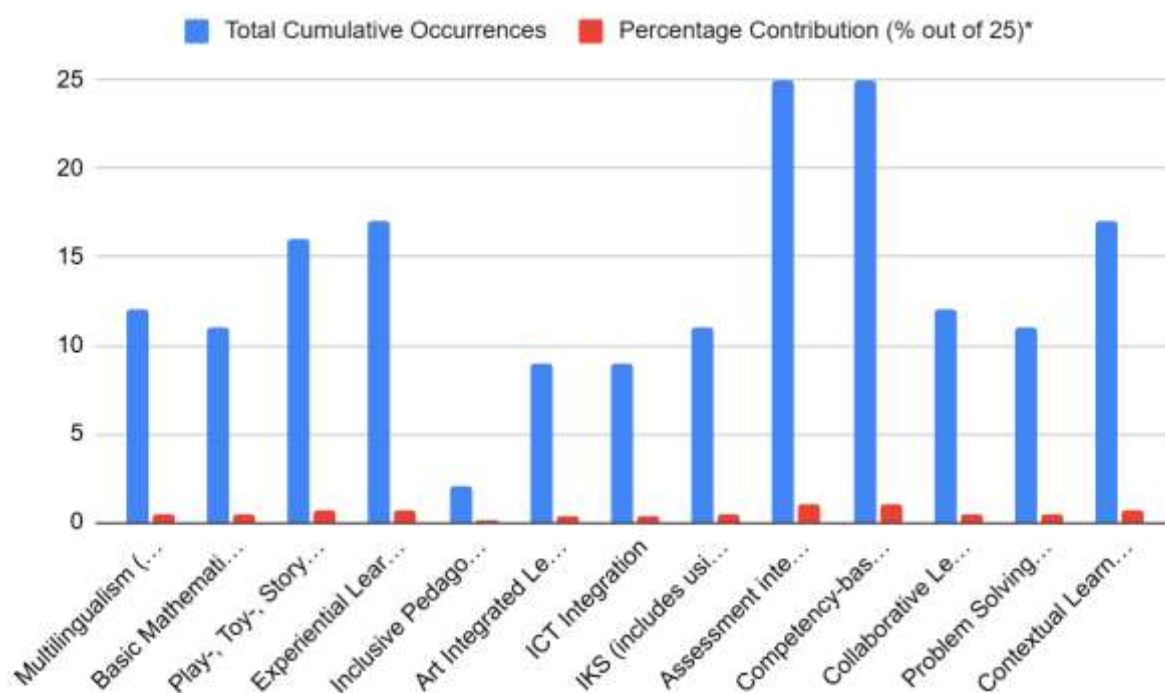


Fig 1: Year-wise representation of identified themes

Table 2 and Fig 2 clearly shows the highest level (100%) of representations of two themes viz. Assessment integration and Competency-based Learning. All the projects were found assessing the students, either under the experimental design or integrated to observe the changes. Similarly, the major area of transformation; i.e., competency-based learning was incorporated in the form of innovative approaches of skill development with attitude, environment and/or value support system/s. Inclusive pedagogy was the least represented (11.50) among the themes. This may be due to the study confined to the foundational and preparatory stages where children are supposed to be revered in Indian culture, irrespective of their caste, creed, locality, gender etc.

Trend analysis of innovations

Trend analysis reveals the increased focus on FLN themes in the post-NEP 2020 scenario. The innovation projects implemented under the NCERT programme in the selected period introduced several emerging patterns in relation to Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) at the foundational and preparatory stages. Following table shows year-wise comparative trend analysis of the identified themes:

Table 3: Year wise implemented projects under the selected themes

Themes	2019–20	2020–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
Multilingualism	0	1	5	1	5
Basic Mathematical and Financial Operations	1	1	4	3	2
Play-, Toy-, Story- based Joyful Learning	1	2	6	3	4
Experiential Learning	1	3	7	3	3
Inclusive Pedagogy	0	0	1	0	1
Art Integrated Learning	0	1	5	1	2
ICT Integration	0	1	3	1	4
IKS Integration	1	2	4	3	1
Assessment integration	1	3	9	6	6
Competency-based Learning	1	3	9	6	6

Collaborative Learning	0	2	4	3	3
Problem Solving Approach	1	1	5	2	2
Contextual Learning	1	2	7	3	4

Based on the above table, the emerging trend through diagrammatic representation is given below:

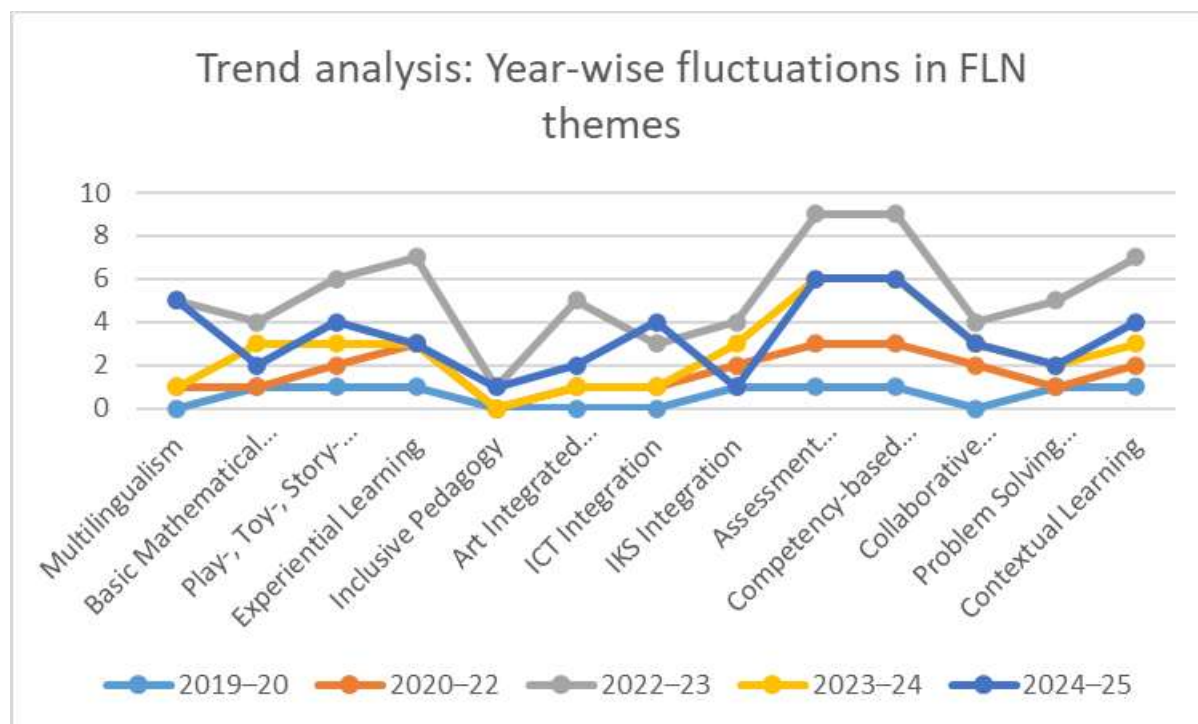


Fig. 2: Year wise Number of Projects under the selected themes

Figure 2 represents the overall increased focus on FLN. The findings are presented thematically to highlight the nature, focus, and evolution of innovation practices over the selected period. Following trend emerged from the projects:

1. Increasing Focus on FLN-Oriented Innovations

Across the five programme cycles (2019–20 to 2024–25), there is a noticeable shift towards innovations explicitly addressing FLN. Projects of 2019–20 reflected broader activity-based and subject-integrated approaches. But subsequent cycles demonstrate a more focused engagement with literacy and numeracy competencies. This trend indicates a growing alignment with initiatives such as NIPUN Bharat.

2. Emphasis on Play-Based and Activity-Oriented Learning

A number of projects across all cycles incorporate play-based and activity-oriented strategies. Examples such as the use of games, storytelling, manipulatives, and classroom-based activities reflected particularly in the teaching of numeracy and language skills. These approaches support experiential learning as outlined in NCF-FS 2022.

3. Integration of Local and Contextual Resources

Projects demonstrated the use of locally available materials, indigenous games, and culturally relevant content to enhance learning experiences. This indicates an effort to contextualise teaching–learning processes and make learning more inclusive for diverse backgrounds learners.

4. Growing Use of Technology in FLN Practices

There is an increase in the use of technology-enabled innovations, including digital content, animation, interactive tools, and e-learning resources. These innovations remain supplementary in nature because they indicate an emerging trend towards integrating technology with foundational learning, especially in the post-pandemic period.

5. Holistic and Integrated Approach to Learning

Projects also reflected an integrated approach that combines cognitive, socio-emotional, and value-based dimensions of learning. Innovations linking FLN with art, environmental awareness, and social-emotional learning suggest a move towards holistic development, as envisaged in NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022.

6. Variability in Depth and Implementation

A wide range of innovative practices is observed, the depth and rigour of implementation vary across projects. Some innovations demonstrate structured design and clear learning outcomes, whereas others remain activity-based without systematic assessment or long-term sustainability planning. This indicates a need for strengthening the design and evaluation components of innovation practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that innovation in relation to FLN practices at the foundational and preparatory stages are increasing and reflecting the priorities articulated in NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022. The growing emphasis is given on play-based, activity-oriented, and context-responsive approaches. This suggested a gradual shift from rote-learning practices to experiential learning.

Learning is viewed as an active and socially mediated process where use of games, stories, local materials and interactive strategies observed in the analysed projects. This reinforces the idea that meaningful learning experiences contribute significantly to the development of foundational competencies.

The results also indicated the influence of policy-driven initiatives such as NIPUN Bharat. This have brought FLN to the forefront of educational priorities. The increasing visibility of FLN-focused innovations across programme cycles suggested that when policy frameworks is supported by structured institutional mechanisms. It can play an important role in shaping classroom practices.

The analysis also revealed that many projects demonstrate creativity and contextual relevance, the absence of systematic assessment frameworks. But limited emphasis on scalability and sustainability. This highlighted gaps in the design and evaluation of such practices. The innovation often remains confined to isolated efforts rather than being institutionalised within the system.

The variation in the depth and strength of innovations suggested that teacher capacity, institutional support, and contextual factors continue to influence the effectiveness of implementation. This underscores the need for sustained professional development, mentoring, and collaborative platforms to support teachers in designing and refining innovative practices.

There is a need to strengthen the processes through which innovations are systematically developed, evaluated, and scaled. Bridging this gap is essential for ensuring that innovative practices contribute meaningfully to the long-term goals of FLN and educational transformation.

Suggestions

- Future innovation initiatives may place greater emphasis on aligning projects explicitly with the learning outcomes and pedagogical principles outlined in NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022, and NIPUN Bharat.
- Along with pedagogical innovations, greater attention may be given to the incorporation of child-friendly and continuous assessment strategies.

- Platforms for collaboration among teachers, institutions, and regions may be strengthened to promote the exchange of ideas and practices.
- Innovation should be integrated into institutional planning processes, including school development plans and teacher education programmes.
- Addressing the needs of diverse learners, particularly in multilingual and socio-economically varied contexts.

Conclusion

This study concluded that structured platforms for innovation combined with supportive policy frameworks and continuous professional development, can play a important role in enabling teachers to design and sustain effective pedagogical practices. Strengthening these linkages is crucial for achieving the long-term goal. This ensure that every child attains foundational literacy and numeracy in a meaningful and contextually relevant manner. Overall, the study reinforces the importance of aligning classroom innovation with policy priorities. Also, recognising the central role of teachers as agents of change in the educational transformation process is equally important.

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