Higher-Order Thinking and Holistic Development Under Nep 2020: Examining the Alignment Between Curricular Vision and Classroom Experiences

Theertha K. V, Research Scholar[1], Prof. (Dr.) M. N. Mohamedunni Alias Musthafa[2*]

[1]Department of Education, Central University of Kerala

[2]Professor, Department of Education, Central University of Kerala

[*]Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 significantly shifts school education by prioritizing higher-order thinking and holistic development within curriculum and pedagogy. It promotes critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and learner well-being. However, these outcomes depend heavily on classroom curriculum implementation. This paper employs qualitative document analysis and stakeholder interviews to explore how current secondary curricula align with NEP 2020.

The policy and curriculum documents emphasize questioning, discussion, problem-solving, and experiential learning. Participants reported the presence of these practices only to a limited extent. Teachers described classroom teaching as centered mainly on explanation, questioning, discussion, and a small number of activities, while students identified experiments, videos, and demonstrations as helpful for understanding lessons. By contrast, projects, investigations, and open discussion were reported as occasional, and students seldom described independently locating information or concluding. Teachers identified syllabus completion as a key constraint on sustained discussion. Participation was uneven, as some students remained silent for fear of giving incorrect answers or being teased. Students also reported pressure related to marks, comparison with classmates, and limited play opportunities. Although some students reported using ChatGPT for homework and other tasks, the data do not permit conclusions about its influence on thinking.

Overall, practices conducive to higher-order thinking were present but neither consistent nor equally accessible to all students. The gap lies not only in the frequency of such practices, but also in their depth and inclusiveness. As the study did not include classroom observation, the findings are limited to participant accounts. Nevertheless, they indicate the need to address time for discussion, assessment practices, and support for less vocal students.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Curriculum Transaction, Secondary Education, Holistic Development, Higher-Order Thinking

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a shift from rote content acquisition toward competency-based, holistic education that emphasizes understanding, creativity, critical thinking, and ethical formation (Cheruvalath & Shirodkar, 2024; Kandakatla et al., 2024; Sivasubramanian, 2026). It expects schools to develop learners who can think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, collaborate, and respond responsibly to various situations (NEP 2020, pp. 4-6). This vision requires changes not only in curriculum content but also in classroom practice.

NEP 2020 views education as a process that attends to the intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, physical, and creative dimensions of learners (NEP 2020, pp. 4-6). In this study, higher-order thinking is defined as the upper level of the revised Bloom's taxonomy, namely analyzing, evaluating, and creating. It is conceptualized as the cognitive component of the holistic development framework envisioned by NEP 2020. These capacities are relevant for judgment, decision-making, reflection, communication, and responsible participation, and this is especially significant in secondary education, where adolescents develop more complex reasoning and independent judgment (Byrnes & Torney-Purta, 1995; Phakiti, 2018; Ellerton, P., 2020).

These aims depend on curriculum transaction, where curricular intentions are enacted through teaching, learning, interaction, and assessment (Teig et al., 2024). NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 emphasise learner-centred, experiential, inquiry-based, competency-oriented, and discussion-based learning (NEP 2020, pp. 12-13; NCF-SE 2023, pp. 5-6). Whether these expectations are reflected consistently in secondary classrooms remains an empirical question.

Empirical research on NEP 2020 has largely concentrated on teachers' awareness of the policy, their perceptions of its major provisions, and the constraints they encounter during implementation (Benny et al., 2026; R. Kumar & Kumari, 2026; Kulal et al., 2024; Kakade et al., 2026). Studies of teachers and other education stakeholders consistently report uneven awareness, generally positive but qualified perceptions, and recurring concerns about capacity building, infrastructure, and institutional readiness (Kulal et al., 2024; Kakade et al., 2026). Sharma and Akalamkam (2021), drawing on responses from 151 school teachers, examined views on curriculum and pedagogy, assessment, and governance, and reported uneven levels of agreement alongside concerns about implementation. Sowmya et al. (2022), in a study of 50 teachers, likewise found variation in teachers' awareness and perceptions across the policy's philosophical, curricular, and professional dimensions. These studies confirm that teachers' perspectives are central to understanding NEP 2020, but they do not by themselves show how policy aspirations are translated into daily routine pedagogy. That gap matters because implementation is repeatedly shaped by teacher preparation, institutional support, infrastructure, and contextual constraints rather than by policy design alone (Benny et al., 2026; Vats & Sharma, 2026; Sivaraman et al., 2026). alone (Kulal et al., 2024), (Benny et al., 2026), (Gale et al., 2022).

Research on classroom practice provides a necessary complementary perspective. Thapliyal (2021), based on 120 classroom observations across 12 secondary schools, drew attention to questioning practices such as the use of higher-order questions, probing, and wait time in classroom interaction. This line of evidence is especially relevant to the present inquiry because students' opportunities to analyse, justify, question, and express ideas depend not only on curricular intent but also on the interactional conditions teachers create in classrooms. Recent work similarly suggests that NEP 2020's learner-centred and holistic vision is often mediated by classroom environment, pedagogical choices, and institutional support, while traditional teacher-led practices frequently remain dominant (Naidu et al., 2026; Benny et al., 2026).

Taken together, these studies address policy awareness, teacher perceptions, and selected dimensions of classroom pedagogy, but they leave insufficiently examined the relationship between policy expectations and students' lived classroom experiences. The present study investigates that intersection through document analysis and the accounts of teachers and Class IX students. Its specific focus is the relationship between curricular expectations for higher-order thinking and the broader aim of holistic development, both of which are central to NEP 2020's reform agenda (Venkata et al., 2025; K. Kumar et al., 2021). By comparing policy provisions with stakeholder experiences, the study seeks to identify which classroom practices support this vision and where opportunities for inquiry, participation, independent thinking, and reflection remain constrained.

With this background, the present study examines the extent to which current secondary school curriculum transaction supports higher-order thinking and holistic development as envisioned by NEP 2020. The study draws on document analysis and the analysis of teachers and Class IX students to identify areas of alignment and gaps between curricular vision and classroom enactment.

The study intends to explore further questions through the objectives stated below.

1. To analyse how NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 articulate higher-order thinking and holistic development as curricular expectations for secondary education

2. To explore secondary school teachers' reflections on the extent to which current curriculum transactions support higher-order thinking and holistic development among learners.

3. To explore secondary school students' experiences and perceptions of classroom learning practices that contribute to higher-order thinking and their broader holistic development.

4. To identify the areas of alignment and gaps between the curricular vision articulated in NEP 2020 and its enactment through current secondary school curriculum transaction, particularly in relation to higher-order thinking and holistic development.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

NEP 2020 places school education beyond the narrow pursuit of examination performance. It emphasises understanding, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, values, and responsible participation (NEP 2020, pp. 4-6). The present study examines how these expectations are reflected in curriculum transaction, understood as the actual process through which curriculum is taught, discussed, experienced, and assessed in the secondary classroom. The focus is therefore not merely on what the curriculum prescribes, but on what teachers and Class IX students experience during its enactment (Floyd & Dunham, 2025). Vygotsky's theory adds the importance of dialogue, collaboration, and guided interaction in the development of thinking (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

The developmental perspective is informed by Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Adolescents entering the formal operational stage increasingly develop capacities for abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and systematic problem-solving (Amsel & Moshman, 2015).

Bloom's revised taxonomy provides the principal conceptual basis for understanding higher-order thinking (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Its cognitive processes-analysing, evaluating, and creating-require learners to work with knowledge rather than simply recall it. These processes correspond closely with NEP 2020's emphasis on critical inquiry, creativity, application, and problem-solving (NEP 2020, pp. 12-13). Holistic development encompasses cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, physical, and creative dimensions (NEP 2020, pp. 4-6). Humanistic perspectives support viewing education as concerned with the whole person rather than academic attainment alone (Saito & Akiyama, 2024). The study treats higher-order thinking as an important part of holistic learner development. Classroom experiences that encourage analysis, evaluation, creativity, problem-solving, reflection, and independent judgement are considered relevant not only to cognitive growth but also to the learner's wider social, emotional, ethical, and personal development. The analysis therefore examines how the vision of NEP 2020 is translated through curriculum transaction into such learning experiences.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, combining document analysis, reflective interactions with teachers, and semi-structured interviews with Class IX students to examine how curriculum transaction at the secondary level aligns with the NEP 2020 vision of higher-order thinking and holistic development, with attention to classroom teaching practices, student participation, classroom interaction, and assessment, opportunities for independent thinking, and the broader development of learners. The study focused on teachers' and students' reported experiences of classroom learning rather than direct classroom observation or the measurement of learning outcomes.

3.2 Context of the Study

The study was conducted in five secondary schools in Kozhikode district, Kerala, affiliated with the Kerala State Board. The participating schools included government and aided schools, where Malayalam and English were

used as the medium of instruction. The inquiry focused on Class IX, as this stage provides an opportunity to examine how classroom practices support learners' participation, reasoning, problem-solving, and broader development. The curriculum followed in the participating schools was considered alongside the national and state-level policy documents to understand the relationship between curricular expectations and reported classroom experiences.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The study included 30 secondary school teachers and 10 Class IX students from the five participating schools. Six teachers and two students were included from each school. The teachers were selected purposively, considering their direct involvement in secondary-level teaching, a minimum of three years of teaching experience, and willingness to participate. Teachers from different subject areas were included to obtain perspectives on classroom practices across the school curriculum.

The ten students were also selected purposively, with two students drawn from each participating school. In selecting the students, attention was given to differences in academic achievement, gender and school context, so that the study could consider a range of classroom experiences rather than relying only on the perspectives of students with similar backgrounds or achievement levels. The selection was intended to capture varied experiences of participation, classroom interaction, assessment practices and opportunities for independent thinking.

3.4 Document Analysis

Document analysis was undertaken to establish the policy and curricular framework for examining higher-order thinking and holistic development. NEP 2020 was treated as the principal policy document. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 was examined to understand the curricular and pedagogical expectations associated with this vision, while the Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF) 2023 provided the state-level curricular context (State Council of Educational Research and Training, Kerala, 2023) as a supporting document.

The documents were examined with particular attention to higher-order thinking, holistic development, learner-centred pedagogy, experiential learning and competency-based education. Relevant provisions were organised according to these areas and used as analytical reference points when interpreting the accounts provided by teachers and students. Since the participating schools followed the Kerala State Board curriculum, the policy documents were used to examine areas of alignment and gaps; classroom practices were not automatically treated as direct outcomes of NEP 2020 implementation.

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected over three weeks in August 2026. Reflective interactions with 30 teachers and semi-structured interviews with 10 Class IX students constituted the primary sources of participant data. The discussions focused on classroom organisation, opportunities to ask questions and express ideas, student participation, activity-based learning, analysis and problem-solving, assessment practices, academic pressure, and opportunities for broader learner development.

The semi-structured format provided scope for exploring the central concerns of the study while allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. The researcher documented the responses in writing rather than audio-recording the interactions. These written records formed the basis for the subsequent analysis. Informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers and from the parents or guardians of the student participants, along with consent from the students. Participant identities were anonymised in presenting the findings.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data were analysed manually by the researcher using a thematic approach. The written accounts of teachers and students were read and examined in relation to the study objectives. Recurring ideas, experiences and concerns were identified and coded according to their content. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes that represented important aspects of classroom teaching and learning. The themes were refined by considering their relevance to higher-order thinking, student participation and holistic development.

The analysis resulted in themes concerning teacher-led instruction and syllabus-completion pressure; unequal classroom participation and students' hesitation to ask questions; the role of demonstrations, videos and activity-based learning; limited opportunities for independent thinking and problem-solving; examination pressure and parental expectations; games, peer interaction and social development; and the use of AI tools for academic support. These themes were interpreted in relation to the experiences documented in the written accounts and the curricular expectations identified through document analysis.

During interpretation, the reported classroom practices were also considered in relation to the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), particularly its cognitive processes of remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. This provided a conceptual basis for examining whether the reported learning experiences primarily involved recalling and understanding information or also created opportunities for higher-order cognitive engagement.

Finally, the findings from the document analysis and participant accounts were compared to identify areas of alignment, partial alignment, and gaps between curricular expectations and reported classroom experiences. The analysis focused on understanding the extent to which the practices described by participants appeared to support higher-order thinking and the wider development of Class IX learners. The findings were interpreted within the limits of the qualitative data and the selected school context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Curricular Articulation of Higher-Order Thinking and Holistic Development in NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023

The analysis of the documents National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 shows that higher-order thinking and holistic development are not peripheral expectations of the secondary curriculum. They are embedded in the way learning is expected to be organised. NEP 2020 places Grades 9-12 within the Secondary Stage and associates this stage with greater depth of learning, critical thinking, attention to life aspirations, multidisciplinary study, and greater choice for students (NEP 2020, p. 12).

NEP 2020 also makes a clear distinction between learning that centres on understanding and learning that relies primarily on rote reproduction. It calls for curriculum content to be reduced to essential concepts so that classroom time can be used for critical thinking, inquiry, discovery, discussion, analysis, application, and problem-solving. Experiential learning and competency-based education are proposed as regular features of curriculum transaction, with assessment aligned to learning outcomes, capabilities, and dispositions (NEP 2020, pp. 12-13). The policy's broader educational vision extends beyond cognitive development to social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions (NEP 2020, p. 4).

The NCF-SE 2023 gives this vision a more operational meaning. It defines curriculum as the organised experience of students and includes not only content but also pedagogy, assessment, classroom and school practices, learning environment, and institutional culture (NCF-SE 2023, pp. 8-9). This definition is particularly relevant to the present study because curriculum transaction cannot be judged only from prescribed content. The manner in which teachers teach, students participate, learning is assessed, and the classroom environment is organised are all part of the curricular experience.

The NCF-SE further identifies critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, logical reasoning, ethical and moral reasoning, collaboration, empathy, inclusion, well-being, and related capacities among the intended educational outcomes. It recommends experiential, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, discussion-based, project-based, arts-based, sports-based, and activity-based pedagogies. Assessment is expected to move from primarily testing facts towards assessing capacities and competencies (NCF-SE 2023, pp. 5-6).

The connection between thinking and broader development is particularly visible in the NCF-SE's treatment of values and dispositions. It proposes that these should be developed through classroom practices and school culture rather than being confined to explicit content. At the Secondary Stage, critical feedback is identified as one way of helping students develop the capacity to respond to criticism, praise, success, and failure with greater equanimity. Dialogue and discussion are also linked with rational thinking, sensitivity, and democratic values (NCF-SE 2023, pp. 143-144).

Taken together, NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 establish a curricular vision in which secondary education should provide opportunities to think, question, analyse, create, apply knowledge, engage with others, and develop values and broader learner development. In the present study, these documents served as reference points for examining teachers' and students' reported experiences. Since the participating schools followed the Kerala State Board curriculum, the findings are interpreted in terms of alignment between policy expectations and reported classroom practices, rather than as direct evidence of NEP 2020 implementation.

Teachers' Perspectives on Curriculum Transaction for Higher-Order Thinking and Holistic Development

The teachers' responses portray Class IX curriculum transaction as a combination of teacher explanation, textbook-based learning, questioning, discussion, and selected activity-based practices. Students are not confined entirely to listening and reproducing information. They are given opportunities to participate, ask questions, express ideas, and engage with concepts through different classroom activities. Such experiences create openings for higher-order thinking, particularly when students are required to question, analyse, explain, apply knowledge, or consider more than one possible response.

A recurring concern in the responses is the time available for deeper engagement. Teachers have to complete the prescribed portions within the academic schedule. Activities involving inquiry, discussion, problem-solving, and exploration demand more classroom time than direct explanation. When syllabus completion becomes pressing, extended discussion and reflection become difficult to sustain. The concern, therefore, is not whether such practices exist, but whether students encounter them often enough to make them a consistent part of learning.

This has implications for the broader purpose of education. Higher-order thinking involves more than performing well on cognitively demanding questions. When students examine different perspectives, justify their reasoning, solve unfamiliar problems, make decisions, and respond to others' ideas, they also develop capacities relevant to social, emotional, ethical, and personal development. This connects higher-order thinking with the broader conception of holistic development adopted in the study. NEP 2020 associates education with critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, empathy, ethical values, and resilience (NEP 2020, pp. 5-6). It also calls for classroom experiences involving critical thinking, inquiry, discussion, analysis, application, and problem-solving (NEP 2020, pp. 12-13).

The NCF-SE 2023 follows a similar direction. It places critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, empathy, ethical reasoning, and well-being among the intended educational outcomes and recommends experiential, inquiry-driven, discussion-based, and activity-based approaches (NCF-SE 2023, pp. 5-6).

The teachers' accounts suggest partial integration of practices that can support higher-order thinking within Class IX curriculum transaction. Questioning, discussion and selected activity-based approaches provide opportunities for students to engage with ideas beyond simple recall. However, the accounts also indicate that syllabus-completion demands can make it difficult to sustain extended discussion, inquiry and reflection. The findings

therefore point to a need for more regular and inclusive opportunities for students to question, reason, solve problems and reflect on their own learning.

Students' Experiences of Classroom Learning for Higher-Order Thinking and Holistic Development

Participation appeared uneven across the classroom. Students who were already doing well academically were described as more active in answering questions and joining discussions, whereas others were less willing to speak. The responses also indicate that teachers sometimes have limited time to wait for individual responses. Thus, an opportunity to participate does not necessarily mean that every student feels equally comfortable using it.

Activities involving direct experience were described more positively. Experiments, videos, stories, and demonstrations helped students understand lessons and, in some cases, prompted them to ask further questions. Projects, investigations, and group work were also part of classroom learning, but students indicated that these were not frequent. Opportunities to search for information independently, form their own conclusions, or think through a problem without relying on an already provided answer were particularly limited. This is important in relation to NEP 2020, which expects classroom learning to provide space for questioning, critical thinking, analysis, application, problem-solving, and creative and collaborative activity (NEP 2020, p. 12).

The students' accounts also point to aspects of development that extend beyond academic learning. Games and physical activities were described as useful occasions for talking with classmates and building relationships. Students noted that friendship groups within the class can sometimes remain separate, with only a few students interacting freely across groups. Regular opportunities for games and shared activities could therefore provide a different kind of social interaction from that available during subject periods. The limited availability of game periods, however, reduces these opportunities. This observation is consistent with the NCF-SE's treatment of physical education and well-being as integral parts of secondary education (NCF-SE 2023, pp. 62-63).

Academic pressure was another prominent part of the students' experience. Marks were not viewed simply as an indication of individual performance; students described being compared with classmates and experiencing parental pressure based on examination results. This environment can influence how students approach learning and what they consider important in the classroom. At the same time, students described digital tools, particularly ChatGPT, as useful for completing homework, assignments, and projects when they did not have someone available to guide them. Thus, technology has become a practical source of academic assistance, although its growing use also raises questions about how much of the thinking and work remains with the learner. This suggests that technology is experienced simultaneously as a learning support and as a means of completing academic tasks under pressure. Students' desire for more free time and a more relaxed classroom approach further indicates that curriculum transaction is experienced not only in terms of academic learning but also in relation to students' wider well-being.

Taken together, the student accounts suggest that opportunities for higher-order thinking are present but are not always regular or sustained. Students described positive experiences with demonstrations, videos and other activities, while also indicating limited opportunities for independent inquiry, problem-solving and forming their own conclusions. These experiences suggest that the availability of learning activities alone does not ensure consistent participation or engagement in higher-order thinking and point to implementation concerns centred less on the absence of appropriate practices than on their regularity, inclusiveness, depth, and accessibility to all learners.

Alignment and Gaps between Curricular Vision and Classroom Enactment

The comparison between the curricular documents and the accounts of teachers and students indicates partial and uneven alignment between curricular expectations and reported classroom experiences. Several practices that can support higher-order thinking are present, but the accounts suggest that opportunities for independent inquiry, sustained discussion, and inclusive participation are not consistently available. These findings point to

a difference between the educational vision expressed in the policy documents and the experiences reported by participants, rather than a complete absence of relevant classroom practices.

The teacher and student accounts show that several of these practices are already present. Group activities, role play, experiments, projects, classroom discussions, videos, and computer-based learning are used in Class IX. Students particularly valued experiments, demonstrations, stories, and videos because these helped them understand lessons more clearly and sometimes encouraged them to ask questions. Such activities create opportunities for students to engage with ideas rather than simply receive information from the teacher or textbook.

The difficulty is that these experiences are not sufficiently frequent. Students reported very few opportunities to compare ideas, analyse a problem, consider different solutions, search for information independently, or arrive at their own conclusions. Projects, investigations, and group activities were described as occasional rather than regular features of classroom learning. Participation was also uneven. According to the student responses, academically stronger students tend to participate more actively, while some others hesitate to ask questions or express their views because they fear giving a wrong answer or being teased. Thus, providing an activity does not necessarily mean that every learner is able or willing to participate in it.

The pressure of time and examinations further shapes this situation. Teachers have to complete the prescribed portions within the available academic schedule, while students remain conscious of marks and comparison with peers. The student responses indicate that examination performance influences both classroom behaviour and learning priorities. This is significant because NEP 2020 calls for assessment to give greater importance to competencies, higher-order skills, and the application of knowledge rather than relying mainly on recall (NEP 2020, pp. 18-19).

These findings also have implications for holistic development. When students analyse, question, solve problems, exchange viewpoints, collaborate, and make decisions, they are not developing cognitive abilities in isolation. Such experiences also provide opportunities to develop communication, confidence, cooperation, judgement, creativity, reflection, and sensitivity towards others. Higher-order thinking can therefore be understood as an important cognitive component of the wider development envisaged for the learner. The limited opportunities reported for games, interaction, self-expression, and reflection are consequently relevant to holistic development as well.

The student's account of using ChatGPT for homework, assignments, and projects points to the growing role of AI tools in academic learning. However, the available account is insufficient to determine whether such use supports or substitutes for independent thinking. This raises a question for further investigation about how AI can be integrated into learning in ways that encourage students to question, evaluate, and develop their own ideas. Flipped learning and other discussion-based approaches may be considered as possible pedagogical options, although their effectiveness was not examined in the present study.

Overall, the evidence does not indicate an absence of NEP-aligned practices in Class IX classrooms. Rather, the gap appears in their frequency, depth, inclusiveness, and continuity. The existing practices provide a foundation, but higher-order thinking needs to become a more regular feature of curriculum transaction if it is to contribute meaningfully to the wider development of learners.

Implications

The findings indicate that assessing implementation of NEP 2020 is successful only by assessing to what extent students actually experience the outcome and the nurturant effect of the same is enjoyed by them during their classroom learning, more than the provisions stated in the policy. Class IX classrooms already make use of discussions, group activities, experiments, projects, questioning, and other active learning practices. Their use, however, is not sufficiently regular or sustained. Students need more classroom time to question ideas, analyse information, solve problems, explain their reasoning, and consider different viewpoints. The study also treats higher-order thinking as an important component of holistic development. It contributes not only to intellectual

growth but also to students' ability to make judgements, reflect on experiences, interact with others, and respond to situations independently. When students reason, make decisions, communicate their views, collaborate, reflect, and consider alternative perspectives, cognitive development is connected with their social, emotional, ethical, and personal growth (Shi et al.,2025). Classroom opportunities for these experiences should extend beyond students who already perform well academically and include quieter and less confident learners.

Assessment deserves particular attention. If examinations continue to place strong emphasis on reproducing expected answers, teachers and students have limited space for deeper engagement with learning (Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2002). Greater use of tasks requiring application, analysis, evaluation, problem-solving, and creation would bring classroom assessment closer to NEP 2020's emphasis on competency development and higher-order cognitive skills, especially reasoning rather than factual recall (Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2002; Ghosh, 2025; Spoorthy Reddy et al., 2024).

Teacher preparedness and institutional conditions are equally relevant. Teachers need adequate professional support and sufficient classroom time to use inquiry-based, experiential, collaborative, and learner-centred approaches meaningfully. The issue cannot be addressed by asking teachers to adopt new methods without considering the conditions under which curriculum transaction takes place.

The findings also raise a question about the place of AI in school learning. Students already use tools such as ChatGPT for academic tasks. Their usefulness should be recognised, but classroom practices should ensure that technological assistance does not replace students' own reasoning and construction of knowledge. Flipped classroom approaches offer one possible direction for further consideration, allowing classroom time to be used more intensively for discussion, inquiry, problem-solving, reflection, and teacher-guided learning (Love et al., 2015; Lendínez-Turón et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the study suggests that the implementation of NEP 2020 depends on the quality of everyday classroom experiences. The policy vision becomes meaningful when students regularly experience opportunities to think, participate, create, question, and develop as whole persons.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how far the present secondary school curriculum transaction reflects the NEP 2020 vision of higher-order thinking and holistic development. The policy and curriculum documents show a clear move away from learning based mainly on factual recall. They give greater space to questioning, analysis, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, reflection, and application of knowledge. These abilities are also relevant to the wider development of the learner.

The accounts of teachers and students show that some of these practices are already part of classroom learning. Discussions, group activities, experiments, projects, questioning, and other activity-based practices are being used. Students particularly value activities that help them understand concepts and encourage them to ask questions. Their experiences also reveal that such opportunities are not available with the same regularity or depth across classroom situations. Pressure to complete the syllabus, examination demands, limited time for discussion, unequal participation, and fewer opportunities for independent exploration continue to influence curriculum transaction.

The findings indicate partial but uneven integration of NEP-aligned practices in Class IX curriculum transaction. The gap is most visible in the frequency, depth, and inclusiveness of opportunities for higher-order thinking, rather than in the complete absence of such practices. Higher-order thinking deserves particular attention within this process because analysing, reasoning, creating, communicating, reflecting, and making informed decisions contribute to several dimensions of learner development.

The findings call for closer attention to classroom pedagogy, assessment practices, teacher preparedness, institutional support, learning environments, and the use of technology. Policy provisions alone cannot establish the intended change. The more meaningful measure is whether students regularly get the time, space, and support

to question, think for themselves, apply what they learn, participate with confidence, and grow beyond academic performance.

Limitations

The study involved only 30 teachers and 10 Class IX students, limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. The findings were based on teacher reflections, student interviews, and curriculum document analysis; hence, they may not fully capture actual classroom practices. The study did not include systematic classroom observations or quantitative measurements of higher-order thinking skills. Participants' personal experiences and willingness to express their views may also have influenced the findings. Furthermore, the study examined a limited period of curriculum implementation and could not establish long-term changes in learners' cognitive development. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context and scope of the study. Therefore, the findings may not be generalisable to other educational contexts.

Ethical Approval

Informed consent was obtained from participants. The researchers obtained parental consent and student consent for student participation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there were no conflicts of interest during any stage of this research or at any stage of the research process.

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