NEP 2020 AND LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION: TOWARDS HOLISTIC AND FUTURE-READY LEARNERS.

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 repositions Indian education around holistic development, conceptual understanding, competency formation, experiential learning, multidisciplinary learning, and the cultivation of ethical and socially responsible dispositions. Life skills education, which fosters the psychological along with interpersonal capacities that individuals must own to fulfil their daily responsibilities, has a long international history, but is often considered as a non-requisite in schools. This conceptual paper presents the two ideas first as distinct fields, giving a comprehensive account of NEP 2020 and its school-education reforms and a parallel account of the concept, components, theoretical foundations, and evidence base of life skills education. It then analyses how the two are related and what that relationship offers learners. The analysis draws on the policy text, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023, the World Health Organization's life-skills perspective, social and emotional learning research, and future-oriented competency frameworks. The paper advances three propositions. First, life skills should be treated as an integrated learning architecture rather than a discrete timetable subject. Second, meaningful development requires alignment among curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher learning, and school culture. Third, future readiness should be understood broadly to include learner agency, well-being, ethical participation, adaptability, digital judgment, and lifelong learning, rather than employability alone. An original five-domain NEP–Life Skills Framework, a policy-to-practice chain, a continuous implementation cycle, a competency-mapping matrix, assessment principles, institutional recommendations, and a research agenda for Indian school education are proposed.

Keywords: NEP 2020, life skills education, holistic education, competency-based learning, learner agency, resilience, social-emotional learning, future-ready learners, experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

School education is increasingly expected to prepare young people for situations that cannot be fully predicted in advance. Learners require disciplinary knowledge, but they also need to interpret information, regulate emotions, communicate across differences, collaborate, make responsible choices, cope with setbacks, and continue learning when circumstances change. This broader

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understanding of educational purpose has strengthened international attention to competencies, agency, well-being, and transferable skills (OECD, 2019, 2025; UNESCO, 2024).

In India, the National Education Policy 2020 is a fundamental policy framework for this transition. The policy emphasizes holistic development alongside conceptual awareness, analytical thinking, innovation, moral responsibilities as well as constitutional ideals, hands-on learning, competency-based instruction, with multifaceted education. It explicitly discusses life skills comprising interpersonal skills, collaboration, unity, as well perseverance (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023 affirms the development in favour of proficiency along with instructional indicators of educational learning, featuring monitoring, artefacts, and diverse appraisal approaches, alongside student progress documentation (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The underlying dilemma is that the term 'life skills' may appear overly generalized in directing instructional methods. If every desired attribute is classified as a life skill, educational institutions could produce extensive descriptions devoid of a progressive chronology, tangible educational encounters, or substantive evaluations. A more useful approach is to name a limited set of interdependent competencies and then design repeated opportunities for students to practise them in authentic contexts. This paper therefore treats life skills as a system of capabilities that links self-management, relationships, thinking, ethical judgment, adaptability, and responsible use of technology.

The need for such an integrated approach is supported by the wider evidence base. Durlak et al. (2011) synthesised 213 universal school-based social and emotional learning programmes involving 270,034 students and reported improvements across social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. More recently, Cipriano et al. (2023) synthesised 424 studies from 53 countries involving 575,361 students and found positive effects across skills, attitudes, behaviour, peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement, while also showing variation associated with programme characteristics and implementation quality. Indian evidence also writes down the relevance of school-based life skills education while highlighting the need for stronger implementation and research. Tiwari and Bajpai (2021), reviewing 77 studies in the Indian context, showed positive attention to psychosocial competencies and called for stronger programme design and stakeholder involvement. Kirchhoff and Keller (2021) found that school-based life-skills programmes commonly broaden their focus during adolescence toward social-cognitive skills, decision-making and relationships, but also noted gaps in evidence about sustainable effects.

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Aim and objectives

The aim of this paper is to clarify what NEP 2020 and life skills education each contribute to school education, to analyse how the two are related, and to explain how that relationship can help learners. Specifically, the paper looks to:

- present a comprehensive account of NEP 2020, covering its rationale, guiding principles, school structure, and the reform directions most relevant to learner development;
- present a comprehensive account of life skills education, covering its definition, core components, related constructs, theoretical foundations, developmental expression, and evidence base;
- analyse the conceptual, pedagogical and assessment links between NEP 2020 and life skills education;
- identify the benefits that NEP 2020-aligned life skills education can offer learners, other stakeholders, and the education system; and
- Propose an implementation-oriented framework, together with assessment principles, risk mitigation strategies, and a research agenda.

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW

Background and rationale

NEP 2020 was approved by the Union Cabinet of India in July 2020 and is widely described as the first comprehensive national education policy of the twenty-first century. It replaces the National Policy on Education 1986, as changed in 1992, and sets out reforms for school education, higher education, teacher education, and the regulation of the system (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy situates itself within the global agenda for sustainable development, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and fair quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The policy responds to several concerns. One is access and equity: bringing all children into school and keeping them there. A second is the quality of learning, especially the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy in the early years, without which later learning is constrained. A third is the nature of curriculum and assessment, where the policy criticises rote memorisation and examination-centred practice and calls for conceptual understanding, application, and the development of higher-order abilities. A fourth is the changing knowledge landscape, in which technology, new forms of

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work and rapid social change require learners who can keep learning throughout life (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Vision and guiding principles

NEP 2020 describes education as a means of developing not only cognitive capacity but also character and well-rounded individuals who are equipped with the skills that the twenty-first century requires. The guiding principles of the policy can be grouped into five clusters. The first concerns the learner: recognising and nurturing the distinctive capabilities of each child and promoting flexibility so that learners can choose their paths. The second concerns knowledge and curriculum: removing hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, and between academic and vocational streams, and promoting multidisciplinary and holistic education with an emphasis on conceptual understanding rather than rote learning. The third concerns dispositions and values: creativity, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, human and constitutional values, and life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience. The fourth concerns pedagogy and assessment: regular formative assessment that supports learning, extensive use of technology, and respect for multilingualism and local context. The fifth concerns the system: equity and inclusion, the centrality of teachers, and continuous review and improvement (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Taken together, these principles define the educational purpose of the policy as the development of the whole learner. They are the reason that the connection with life skills is more than a matter of terminology: several of the principles cannot be realised unless learners practise communication, collaboration, reflection, ethical judgment, and self-regulation in ordinary school life.

The restructured school curriculum: the 5+3+3+4 design

NEP 2020 proposes to replace the earlier 10+2 school structure with a 5+3+3+4 design that is organised around the developmental stages of the learner. The structure integrates early childhood education into the formal system and aims to give each stage a distinct pedagogical character, as summarised in Table 1. The NCFSE 2023 retains these four stages and develops curricular goals and competencies for each (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Table 1. School stages envisaged in NEP 2020 and their pedagogical emphasis

Stage	Approximate age and grades	Pedagogical emphasis in the policy

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Stage	Approximate age and grades	Pedagogical emphasis in the policy
Foundational	Ages 3–8; three years of pre-school and Grades 1–2	Play-based and activity-based learning; foundational language and numeracy; early social and emotional development
Preparatory	Ages 8–11; Grades 3–5	Gradual move to more formal classroom learning that continues to use play, discovery and activity
Middle	Ages 11–14; Grades 6–8	More abstract concepts in each subject; experiential learning; subject-specialist teaching; early vocational exposure
Secondary	Ages 14–18; Grades 9–12	Multidisciplinary study with greater depth, critical thinking, and flexibility in the choice of subjects

Source: Ministry of Education (2020) and Ministry of Education (2023).

Reform directions relevant to learner development

Several reform directions in the policy are particularly significant for learner development and, as Section 4 shows, for life skills.

- **Foundational literacy and numeracy.** The policy gives priority to reading, writing and numeracy by the end of the early grades, and recommends that the home language or mother tongue be used as the medium of instruction wherever possible, at least up to Grade 5.
- **Reduced content load and conceptual learning.** The curriculum is to be reduced to core essentials so that space is created for inquiry, discussion, analysis, and discovery rather than memorisation.
- **Experiential and integrated pedagogy.** The policy encourages experiential learning, including art-integrated, sports-integrated, and story-based approaches, and project and activity-based learning.
- **Flexibility and multidisciplinary.** Students are to have greater choice of subjects at the secondary stage, and the rigid boundaries between disciplines and between curricular and co-curricular areas are to be softened.

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- **Vocational exposure.** Vocational education is to be integrated into school education, with exposure beginning in the middle stage, so that learners see work and practical skills as part of general education.
- **Assessment reform.** The policy moves toward regular, formative, competency-based assessment, a multidimensional progress card that includes self-assessment and peer assessment, reform of board examinations to reduce high-stakes pressure, and a national assessment centre that was subsequently operationalized as PARAKH.
- **Teachers and school systems.** The policy emphasises continuous professional development for teachers, a four-year integrated teacher education programme, school complexes that share resources, and a stronger focus on equity and inclusion for disadvantaged groups and learners with disabilities.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023

The NCFSE 2023, established by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, compiles the regulations into curricular outlines for the four phases. It frames education as holistic development that includes physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual dimensions together with values and dispositions. It describes curricular goals and competencies, identifies curricular areas such as languages, mathematics, sciences, social sciences, arts education, physical education and well-being, and vocational education, and treats assessment as a continuous process that uses varied forms of evidence, including observation and student-created artefacts (Ministry of Education, 2023). For the purposes of this paper, the NCFSE is the main bridge between the aspirational language of the policy and the daily decisions of teachers.

Implementation context

Education is on the concurrent list of the Indian Constitution, so the policy is implemented through the central government together with state governments, school boards, teacher education institutions, and schools. The pace and form of implementation therefore vary across states and school types. This variation has two implications for the present paper. First, a framework for life skills should be simple enough to be adapted across different contexts and resource conditions. Second, schools and teachers, rather than policy documents alone, are the ultimate agents of change, a point that returns in Sections 10 and 13.

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LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION: CONCEPT, COMPONENTS AND FOUNDATIONS

Definition and meaning

The WHO tradition defines life skills in psychosocial terms: abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that help individuals deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (World Health Organization, 1997). The definition has three features that matter for education. Life skills are psychosocial, because they connect internal processes such as emotion and thought with social interaction. They are transferable, because they are intended to be useful across situations rather than tied to one subject. And they are *learnable*, because they can be developed through guided practice rather than being fixed personality traits.

Life skills education is the intentional development of these abilities through teaching, learning experiences and the school environment. In its early international form, it was associated with health promotion and the prevention of risk behaviour, but the scope has since widened to include learning, citizenship, livelihood, and well-being. The four pillars of education described in the Delors report, namely learning to know, to do, to live together and to be, are often used to show how life skills extend across the cognitive, practical, social and personal dimensions of education (Delors et al., 1996).

Core life skills

The WHO framework identifies ten core skills arranged in five complementary pairs: decision-making and problem-solving; creative thinking and critical thinking; communication and interpersonal skills; self-awareness and empathy; and coping with emotions and coping with stress (World Health Organization, 1997). Table 2 summarises their meaning in a school context and shows how each pair corresponds to the domains of the framework proposed in Section 6.

Table 2. WHO core life skills and their school-based interpretation

WHO skill pair	Meaning in a school context	Corresponding domain in this paper's framework
Decision-making and problem-solving	Weighing options, evidence, and consequences; breaking problems into manageable parts and testing solutions	Domain 3 (critical and creative thinking); Domain 4 (ethical decision-making and citizenship)

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WHO skill pair	Meaning in a school context	Corresponding domain in this paper's framework
Creative thinking and critical thinking	Generating ideas and alternatives; questioning, reasoning, and evaluating information and arguments	Domain 3 (critical and creative thinking)
Communication and interpersonal skills	Listening, expressing ideas clearly, cooperating, negotiating, and building respectful relationships	Domain 2 (communication and collaboration)
Self-awareness and empathy	Recognising one's strengths, limits, and feelings; understanding the perspectives and feelings of others	Domain 1 (self-management and emotional resilience); Domain 2
Coping with emotions and coping with stress	Recognising and regulating emotions; using strategies to respond to pressure and setbacks	Domain 1 (self-management and emotional resilience)

Related constructs

Life skills overlap with several other constructs. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is associated with the framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which describes five competence areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). UNESCO describes SEL as involving cognitive, social, emotional and relational dimensions that support well-being, academic success and active citizenship (UNESCO, 2024). Other terms in circulation include transferable skills, soft skills, twenty-first-century skills, and character education. These traditions have different histories and emphases, so the overlap should not be treated as equivalence. In this paper they are used as complementary bodies of evidence, while 'life skills' remains the organising term because it is the term used in NEP 2020.

Theoretical foundations

Four theoretical perspectives help explain how life skills develop and why the manner of teaching matters.

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- **Social learning and self-efficacy.** Bandura (1997) proposes that people form beliefs about their capability through mastery experiences, observing others, encouragement, and the interpretation of their own emotional states. For life skills, this implies that learners need successful experiences of communicating, collaborating, and solving problems, and need to see these behaviours modelled by teachers and peers.
- **Experiential learning.** Dewey (1938) argued that learning arises from experience that is reflected upon, and Kolb (1984) described a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The cycle underpins the action–reflection–feedback–revision sequence used in Section 7.
- **Sociocultural learning.** Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that higher mental functions develop through social interaction and guided participation. Group work, dialogue and peer teaching are therefore not only methods of instruction but also contexts in which communication, empathy and reasoning are formed.
- **Self-determination.** Ryan and Deci (2000) identify autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs whose satisfaction supports motivation and well-being. Classrooms that provide choice, appropriately challenging tasks and a sense of belonging are therefore likely to support the development of life skills.

Taken together, these perspectives support a practice-oriented view: life skills are developed through repeated, supported, reflective experience in a respectful social setting, not through information alone.

Developmental expression of life skills

The same life skill is expressed differently at different ages. A young child practising communication may be learning to take turns and name feelings, whereas an adolescent may be negotiating roles in a project, presenting evidence, or managing disagreement. Because NEP 2020 organises schooling into four stages, it is useful to describe life skills in stage-specific terms, as in Table 3. The table is illustrative and does not prescribe fixed expectations.

Table 3. Illustrative expression of life skills across the NEP 2020 school stages

Stage	Self-management and resilience	Communication and collaboration	Thinking and decision-making

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Stage	Self-management and resilience	Communication and collaboration	Thinking and decision-making
Foundational	Naming feelings; following routines; trying again after a mistake	Taking turns; listening to stories; sharing materials; simple cooperative play	Asking 'why' and 'what if' questions; making simple choices
Preparatory	Setting small goals; calming strategies; seeking help when stuck	Group tasks with defined roles; expressing opinions politely; peer helping	Sorting and comparing information; giving reasons for choices
Middle	Planning time and effort; reflecting on feedback; coping with peer pressure	Project teamwork; respectful disagreement; presenting to an audience	Evaluating sources; analysing cause and effect; weighing consequences
Secondary	Managing stress and workload; setting longer-term academic and career goals	Leading teams; negotiating conflict; communicating with varied audiences	Evidence-based argument; ethical dilemmas; responsible digital and career decisions

Source: Ministry of Education (2020, 2023) and Kirchhoff and Keller (2021).

The evidence base

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses support the educational relevance of life skills and SEL. The two largest syntheses discussed in Section 1 report positive effects on skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic outcomes, with variation linked to programme design and quality of implementation (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). Reviews that focus on life skills specifically have examined the facets of the construct and the components of school-based programmes and have noted differences in how programmes are defined and delivered (Bansal & Kapur, 2022; Sikand Kauts & Saini, 2022). Age-specific work indicates that the emphasis of programmes shifts across childhood and adolescence (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021). Research on adolescent school bullying has also examined links with life skills, which suggests that these competencies are relevant to the quality of peer relationships and school climate (Potard et al., 2021). In the Indian context, Tiwari and Bajpai (2021) found growing attention to psychosocial competencies together with a need for stronger design, stakeholder involvement, and evaluation. Subject-based discussions, such as Kohli's (2022)

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analysis of the English classroom, show how life skills can be approached through existing curricular areas rather than as a separate subject.

HOW NEP 2020 AND LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION ARE RELATED

Upon outlining the policy as well as the domain independently, this part analyses the way they relate to one another. The rationale is that the association is fundamental compared to superficial: the policy establishes the objectives, instructional environment, and testing guidelines that render life skills academically feasible, whereas life skills serve as the means through which a multitude of the policy's ambitions become apparent in learners' conduct.

Shared purpose

NEP 2020 and life skills education are intrinsically connected since both widen the intention of education far past the limited dissemination of topical knowledge. NEP 2020 expressly acknowledges dialogue, collaboration, partnership, along with resilience as life skills, as well as comprehensive growth, artistic expression, logical thinking, moral standards, interactive learning, formative feedback, technological advances, with inclusiveness (Ministry of Education, 2020). The relevance of this correlation is that life skills are woven into the deeper instructional architecture in lieu of being perceived as mere isolated recreational pursuit.

From conceptual understanding to competent action

The policy’s emphasis on conceptual understanding instead of rote learning creates an important pedagogical connection with life skills. When learners are expected to understand, apply, analyse, and reason, they need opportunities to communicate ideas, solve problems, work with others, make decisions and reflect on their learning. Life skills can thus become the process through which academic knowledge is converted into meaningful action. A learner who knows a concept but cannot explain it, apply it to an unfamiliar situation, collaborate with others, or make a responsible decision has only partially developed the educational capability envisaged by a holistic, competency-based approach.

Multidisciplinary and flexible learning

NEP 2020 links life-skills development with its commitment to multidisciplinary and flexible learning. The policy seeks to reduce rigid separations between academic and vocational learning and between curricular and co-curricular activities. This provides space for learners to develop

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competencies through projects, sports, arts, vocational experiences, community activities, clubs, and interdisciplinary tasks. Such encounters may reinforce versatility, interaction, cooperation, inventiveness, as well as reasoning, while also fostering academic expertise (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Morality and Fundamental Principles

The policy's commitment to moral principles as well as constitutional norms, which includes empathy, dignity, accountability, a democratic ethos, equality, and justice, bolsters this connection even further. These virtues symbolize the societal aspect of life skills. Interpersonal interaction in the absence of courtesy may result in confrontation; logical thinking that lacks accountability is potentially detrimental; while technical ability unaccompanied by moral conscience may trigger mischief. NEP 2020 so recommends a conception of life skills that integrates efficacy, obligation, and social consciousness.

The policy-to-practice chain

NEP 2020 and life skills are embedded in a continuum that encompasses policy philosophy, curriculum layout, pedagogy, students' knowledge acquisition, review along with constructive criticism, and the establishment of practical attributes. The policy delivers orientation, yet life skills are thought worthwhile only after learners have been routinely challenged by circumstances that entail dialog, cooperation, problem-solving, contemplation, mental toughness, and mindful decisions.

At the curriculum level, life skills can be embedded within subjects rather than added as a separate subject. Language learning can strengthen communication and empathy; science can develop inquiry, evidence-based reasoning and problem-solving; mathematics can strengthen logical decision-making; social sciences can develop civic responsibility and perspective-taking; physical education can support teamwork and self-regulation; arts can encourage creativity and expression; and vocational education can develop adaptability and practical problem-solving. This cross-curricular model is consistent with the holistic and multidisciplinary orientation of NEP 2020. A school does not need a separate period called ‘life skills’ for students to develop them, and such integration reduces the risk that life skills become an additional burden on an already crowded timetable.

At the pedagogical level, experiential, inquiry-based, project-based, collaborative, and problem-based learning provide natural settings for life-skills development. Students learn communication by communicating, teamwork by working together, and decision-making by making decisions and

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resilience by encountering manageable challenges followed by feedback and reflection. Consequently, the quality of the learning experience becomes as important as the list of competencies written in a curriculum document.

At the assessment level, the movement toward formative and competency-based assessment provides an opportunity to make life skills visible. Observation, portfolios, project work, presentations, peer feedback, self-reflection, performance tasks, and learning journals can provide evidence of how students use competencies in context. The NCFSE 2023 reinforces this direction through its emphasis on holistic development, socio-emotional development, values and dispositions, positive teacher–student relationships and varied forms of learning and assessment (Ministry of Education, 2023). It provides a policy-compatible basis for assessing aspects of life skills without reducing them to decontextualized questionnaires.

An analytical matrix of principles, life skills and learner benefits

Table 4 shows how major NEP 2020 principles can be connected to life-skills development and learner benefits. The matrix is an original synthesis prepared for this paper from the policy and curriculum framework; it is not reproduced from a government table.

Table 4. Analytical linkage between NEP 2020 principles, life skills, and learner benefits

NEP 2020 principle	Life-skills connection	Potential benefit for learners
Holistic development	Self-awareness, self-management, social-emotional growth	Balanced academic, personal and social development
Communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience	Communication, collaboration, empathy, persistence, and coping	Stronger relationships, participation and perseverance
Critical thinking and creativity	Problem-solving, questioning, reasoning, and innovation	Independent judgment and flexible thinking
Ethics and constitutional values	Empathy, responsibility, respect, fairness, and citizenship	More responsible and socially aware behaviour
Experiential learning	Learning by doing reflection, application, and transfer	Greater ability to apply knowledge in real situations

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NEP 2020 principle	Life-skills connection	Potential benefit for learners
Formative and competency-based assessment	Self-assessment, feedback, reflection, and performance evidence	Greater awareness of strengths and areas for improvement
Multidisciplinary education	Perspective-taking, adaptability, and transfer	Ability to connect ideas across subjects and contexts
Technology in education	Digital judgment, information literacy, and responsible use	More critical and ethical digital participation
Equity and inclusion	Respect for diversity, empathy, and cooperation	More inclusive participation and peer relationships
Flexibility and vocational exposure	Planning, adaptability, practical problem-solving, and interpersonal skills	Better preparation for further education, work and changing life demands

Source: Ministry of Education (2020) and Ministry of Education (2023).

A mutually reinforcing relationship

The relationship between NEP 2020 and life skills should be understood as mutually reinforcing. NEP 2020 gives life skills a policy home, while life skills give practical meaning to several of the broad aspirations of the policy. Holistic development becomes observable when learners can manage themselves, communicate, collaborate, think critically, make ethical choices, and adapt. Learning by doing proves valuable when students demonstrate these techniques. Competitive assessment boosts legitimacy whenever schools accumulate documentation supporting its efficacy. In this way, life skills provide a practical route through which the philosophy of NEP 2020 can become visible in classroom and school life.

BENEFITS OF NEP 2020-ALIGNED LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS

The value of integrating life skills within NEP 2020 becomes clearer when considered from the learner's perspective. This section first sets out the principal benefits, then considers future readiness and the wider benefits that increase beyond the individual learner. As noted in Section 1.2, these benefits describe educational potential that depends on implementation quality.

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Principal benefits for learners

1. **Stronger learner agency.** When students are encouraged to make choices, set goals, reflect on progress, and participate actively in learning, they begin to see themselves as contributors to the learning process rather than passive recipients. This is particularly important for adolescents, who are gradually taking greater responsibility for educational, social, and career-related decisions. It also resonates with the self-determination perspective, in which autonomy supports motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2. **Improved capacity to manage challenges.** Resilience is explicitly named in NEP 2020, but it should not be understood simply as 'tolerating stresses. In an educational context it can involve recognising difficulty, seeking support, changing strategies, learning from mistakes, and attempting a task again. A classroom that treats errors as information rather than humiliation can therefore contribute to a more constructive response to academic setbacks. Bandura's (1997) account of mastery experiences suggests that such repeated, supported recovery from difficulty also strengthens learners' belief in their own capability.

3. **Stronger social competence.** NEP 2020 explicitly finds communication, cooperation, and teamwork. When these competencies are practised through group investigations, peer learning, discussions, student leadership and collaborative projects, learners can develop listening, negotiation, perspective-taking, and conflict-management abilities. Such capabilities are valuable inside school but are also transferable to family, community, and higher education and employment contexts. Research linking life skills with peer relationships, including bullying, indicates that these capabilities bear on school climate as well as on individual development (Potard et al., 2021).

4. **Responsible decision-making.** NEP 2020 connects critical thinking with logical decision-making and connects education with ethical and constitutional values. Life-skills education can bring these dimensions together by asking learners not only 'What can I do?' but also 'What evidence supports this choice?' 'Who may be affected?' 'What are the consequences?' and 'Is the decision fair and responsible?' This makes critical thinking socially and ethically meaningful.

5. **Adaptability.** Contemporary learners meet changing technologies, new forms of information, shifting career pathways and complex social environments. A life-skills-oriented education can help learners practise changing strategies when circumstances change, learning new tools,

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evaluating current information and transferring previous learning to unfamiliar problems. This aligns closely with the policy's emphasis on flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and technology-enabled education.

6. **Integration of well-being with learning.** The NCFSE 2023 explicitly places socio-emotional development within holistic education and connects education with physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual development and values. This strengthens the argument that learner well-being should not be treated as separate from educational quality. Students learn more meaningfully when they can participate, belong, communicate, regulate themselves and seek appropriate support.

7. **Academic engagement and learning.** Large-scale reviews of school-based SEL report improvements in academic performance alongside gains in social-emotional skills and behaviour (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). The likely mechanism is not that life skills replace content learning but that they improve the conditions for it: learners who can concentrate, ask questions, work with peers, and persist with difficult tasks are better placed to understand concepts. This is the link between life skills and the policy's priority on conceptual understanding.

8. **Preparation for transitions.** Life skills help learners manage the transitions from one stage of schooling to the next, from school to higher education and from school to work. The international literature on school-to-work transitions emphasises that transferable skills matter alongside qualifications (UNICEF, 2019). NEP 2020's flexibility and vocational exposure create opportunities for learners to practise planning, responsibility and practical problem-solving before these transitions occur.

9. **Inclusive participation.** When classrooms use cooperative structures, rotating roles and respectful dialogue, learners with different backgrounds, languages and abilities have more opportunities to be heard. This links life skills with the policy's commitment to equity and inclusion, although inclusion also requires accessible materials, adequate support, and attention to the needs of diverse learners.

Table 5. Learner benefits and how they may become visible in school

Benefit area	How it may appear in school	Possible evidence

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Benefit area	How it may appear in school	Possible evidence
Learner agency	Students set goals, choose topics, lead activities, and review their own progress	Goal-setting records; learning journals; student-led presentations
Resilience and coping	Students revisit tasks after setbacks, seek help, and adjust strategies	Revised drafts; reflection notes; teacher observation of persistence
Social competence	Students listen, share responsibility, and resolve disagreements in groups	Group-work observation; peer feedback; shared products
Responsible decisions	Students justify choices using evidence and consideration of consequences	Dilemma discussions; decision logs; project rationales
Adaptability	Students apply known strategies to unfamiliar tasks and tools	Transfer tasks; changing-scenario problems
Well-being and belonging	Students take part, ask for help, and treat peers respectfully	Participation patterns; climate surveys; counselling referrals
Academic engagement	Students ask questions, explain reasoning, and persist with difficult content	Quality of questions; explanations; task completion

Why the NEP 2020–life skills link matters for future-ready learners

Future readiness should not be reduced to employability. A future-ready learner must also be able to participate responsibly in relationships and communities, maintain well-being, respond to uncertainty, evaluate information, and learn continuously. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 frames future-oriented learning around student agency, well-being and competencies comprising knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. It also identifies transformative competencies related to creating new value, reconciling tensions, and taking responsibility (OECD, 2019).

For adolescents, this perspective is particularly relevant because schooling coincides with expanding social relationships, identity formation, increasing autonomy and decisions about further education and work. Life skills can therefore be viewed as a bridge between academic learning and the learner's capacity to use knowledge responsibly. The bridge is strongest when students encounter repeated situations in which they must decide, communicate, collaborate, reflect, and revise rather than merely hear about these behaviours. Kirchhoff and Keller (2021) observed that adolescent activities centred

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around more comprehensive social cognition as well as personality traits, whereas Cipriano et al. (2023) revealed that school-based SEL impacts transcend beyond cognitive abilities and involve peer bonds, institution productivity, along with academic accomplishments, suggesting that enactment elements are paramount.

The future-ready learner envisaged in this paper is therefore not simply a learner who possesses more information. The learner is one who can use knowledge with judgment, communicate across differences, collaborate, respond to setbacks, evaluate information, use technology responsibly and continue learning. NEP 2020 provides the policy environment for this broader conception by combining knowledge with competencies, values, flexibility, creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020). The NCFSE 2023 supports the same interpretation by describing education as holistic development involving physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual dimensions, values, and dispositions, and by recognising positive teacher–student relationships, family and community engagement and collaborative and peer learning as important parts of educational experience. Importantly, it connects socio-emotional development with the ability to think and make ethical and rational choices (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Benefits beyond the individual learner

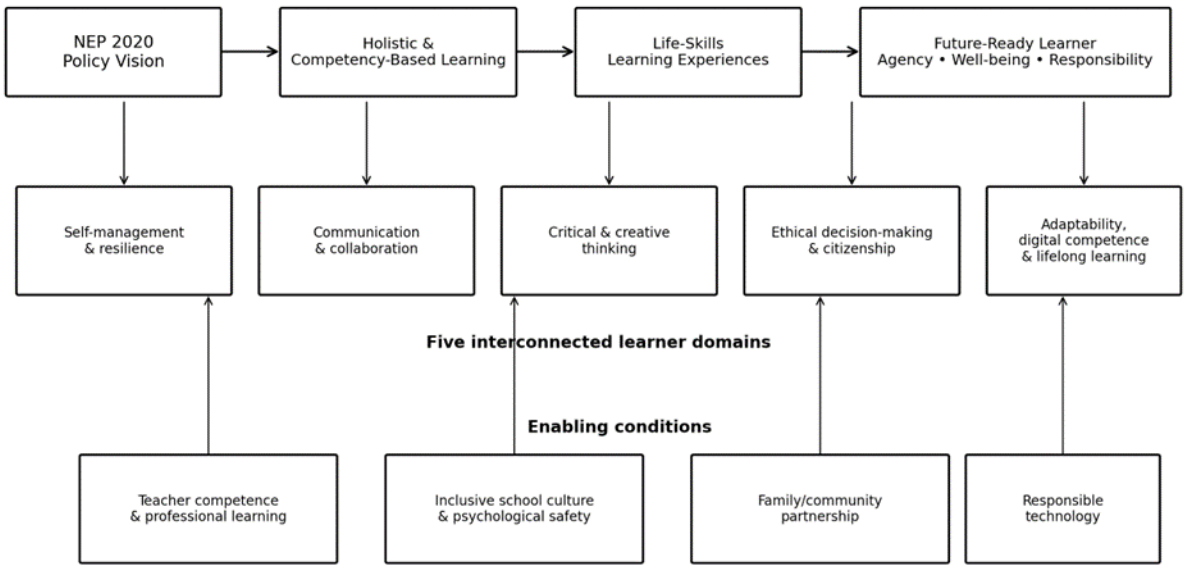
The benefits of life skills education are not confined to learners. For *teachers*, an emphasis on communication, collaboration and inquiry can change classroom interaction, reduce the burden of managing disruptive behaviour and make teaching more reflective, provided that teachers receive adequate preparation (OECD, 2025). For schools, a shared language of competencies can align curriculum, discipline, student leadership, and recognition systems and may contribute to a more positive school climate. For families and communities, learners who can communicate, take responsibility, and solve problems may contribute more constructively to home and civic life, and community-linked projects can bring families into the educational process. For the education system, a competency orientation provides a clearer basis for monitoring development beyond examination scores, which is consistent with the policy's direction on assessment reform. These system-level benefits are plausible and consistent with the literature, but they require empirical testing in Indian settings, a point taken up in Section 14.

An Original NEP–Life Skills Framework

The present paper proposes a five-domain framework designed specifically for the Indian school-policy context. The model is consciously more in-depth compared to a set of ten or twelve skills. It

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breaks down corresponding abilities into developmental spheres and embeds them in an operational configuration featuring policy, instructional practices, assessment, and facilitative constraints.



Source: Author's conceptualization based on Ministry of Education (2020), WHO (1997), OECD (2019), NCFSE (2023), and contemporary SEL evidence.

Figure 1. NEP–Life Skills Framework for Holistic and Future-Ready Learners.

Source: Ministry of Education (2020), World Health Organization (1997), OECD (2019), Ministry of Education (2023)

The framework rests on five propositions. First, competencies develop through use, not through exposure alone. Second, the domains are interdependent rather than sequential. Third, the same competency may be expressed differently across developmental stages and cultural contexts. Fourth, assessment should capture performance and reflection in context. Fifth, teacher competence and school culture are not background variables; they are part of the mechanism through which life skills become visible in classroom practice. The domains and their associated experiences and evidence are set out in Table 6.

Table 6. Five domains of the NEP–Life Skills Framework

Domain	Core capabilities	Illustrative school experiences	Possible evidence of learning

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Domain	Core capabilities	Illustrative school experiences	Possible evidence of learning
1. Self-management and emotional resilience	Self-awareness, emotional regulation, persistence, coping, goal setting	Reflection journals; challenge tasks; goal reviews; structured peer support	Reflection quality; response to setbacks; revision; observed self-regulation
2. Communication and collaboration	Listening, empathy, dialogue, teamwork, conflict management	Group investigations; peer teaching; debates; collaborative projects	Listening behaviour; equitable participation; conflict resolution; shared products
3. Critical and creative thinking	Questioning, reasoning, information evaluation, problem solving, idea generation	Inquiry projects; source comparison; design challenges; case analysis	Quality of questions; evidence use; alternatives considered; justification
4. Ethical decision-making and citizenship	Responsibility, fairness, respect, consequence awareness, civic participation	Community projects; ethical dilemmas; service learning; student councils	Reasoning about consequences; respect for perspectives; responsible action
5. Adaptability, digital competence, and lifelong learning	Learning-to-learn, information literacy, digital judgment, flexibility, transfer	Digital inquiry; changing-scenario tasks; independent learning plans; media analysis	Source evaluation; strategy change; transfer to new contexts; responsible digital conduct

FROM ‘TEACHING LIFE SKILLS’ TO ‘LEARNING THROUGH LIFE SKILLS’

A central argument of this paper is that the pedagogical unit of life skills should be an experience rather than a lecture. Students can be told that teamwork is important without ever learning how to distribute roles, resolve disagreement or hold one another accountable. Likewise, students can be instructed to ‘think critically’ without being given evidence that conflicts, sources that vary in credibility or problems with multiple plausible solutions.

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Experiential learning addresses this gap by creating a cycle of action, reflection, feedback, and revised action, in line with the Deweyan and Kolbian perspectives discussed in Section 3.4. Project-based learning can integrate research, planning, collaboration, and presentation. Inquiry learning can make questioning and evidence use visible. Role play can develop perspective-taking and negotiation. Service learning can connect curriculum to community needs. Learning simulations may aid learners understand the implications of their choices in comparatively secure settings? These strategies resonate closely with the policy's preference for immersive, participatory, as well as competency-driven instruction (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The duty of the instructor equally differs. In contrast to showing all the answers, the instructor set up challenges in which students must tackle obstacles while delineate their arguments. This does not undermine instructors' ability; actually, this highlights an instructional experience. The OECD Teaching Compass additionally stresses on educator autonomy, professional excellence, along with psychological wellness as a foundation for proactive educational reform (OECD, 2025).

CURRICULUM INTEGRATION MATRIX

Table 7 illustrates how life-skills emphases can be embedded in the major curricular areas without adding a separate subject. The examples are indicative and can be adapted by teachers to local context and stage.

Table 7. Integration of life skills across curricular areas

Curricular area	Life-skills emphasis	Example learning task	Transfer beyond the lesson
Languages	Communication, empathy, perspective-taking, collaboration	Dialogue rewriting a conflict from multiple perspectives	Interpersonal communication and conflict management
Science	Critical thinking, problem solving, evidence use, teamwork	Investigate a local environmental problem and defend a solution	Evidence-based decision-making
Mathematics	Reasoning, decision-making, persistence	Compare alternative plans using data and justify a choice	Everyday quantitative judgment

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Curricular area	Life-skills emphasis	Example learning task	Transfer beyond the lesson
Social Science	Ethical reasoning, citizenship, perspective-taking	Structured deliberation on a community issue	Civic participation and respectful disagreement
Physical Education	Self-regulation, teamwork, resilience	Team challenge with rotating leadership and reflection	Cooperation and coping with setbacks
Arts	Creativity, expression, collaboration	Group production with individual reflection	Creative confidence and communication
Vocational/skill education	Adaptability, planning, responsibility	Solve a practical task with constraints and client requirements	Work habits and problem solving
Digital learning	Information literacy, digital ethics, adaptability	Verify competing online claims and document evidence	Responsible technology use

ASSESSMENT: MAKING LIFE SKILLS VISIBLE WITHOUT REDUCING THEM TO A SCORE

Assessment is one of the most difficult parts of life-skills education because many competencies are contextual and developmental. A single paper-and-pencil score cannot adequately stand for how a learner collaborates in a real group, responds to disagreement, or adapts after feedback. The answer is not to abandon assessment but to broaden the evidence base.

A useful assessment system can combine observation, performance tasks, student artefacts, self-reflection, peer feedback, and teacher feedback. The purpose should be developmental: evidence is collected to inform the next learning step. This is consistent with the NCFSE 2023 emphasis on varied evidence, formative assessment and documentation of competency development (Ministry of Education, 2023), and with the policy's proposal for a multidimensional progress card that incorporates self-assessment and peer assessment (Ministry of Education, 2020). Table 8 summarises six principles.

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Table 8. Principles for assessing life skills

Assessment principle	What it means in practice	Example evidence
Authenticity	Assess the competency in a meaningful context	Group problem-solving task
Multiple evidence	Use more than one source of information	Observation + product + reflection
Developmental focus	Track progress rather than label fixed ability	Baseline, feedback and later performance
Transparency	Make success criteria visible to learners	Simple rubric shared before task
Student voice	Include self-assessment and reflection	Learning journal or exit reflection
Transfer	Check whether learning appears in a new context	New scenario requiring the same competency

TEACHER PREPARATION AND SCHOOL CULTURE

Life-skills education cannot be implemented sustainably if teachers are expected to add new competencies without corresponding professional learning. Teacher development should address three layers: conceptual understanding of competencies, pedagogical design for practice and assessment literacy for documenting evidence. Professional learning can include modelling, peer observation, collaborative planning, micro-teaching, and reflection rather than relying only on one-off workshops. The policy's provisions for continuous professional development and a restructured teacher education programme offer a platform for this work (Ministry of Education, 2020).

School atmosphere is equally crucial. A teaching institution that preaches reverence while embracing demeaning disciplinary procedures conveys conflicting messages. A school that demands students to work together while honouring only personal rivalry generates a distinct inconsistency. The everyday activities of assemblies, classroom discourse, disciplinary procedures, student governance, parent communication, and grading systems all convey what the institution genuinely adheres to. Life skills build up authenticity when institutional behaviour and curriculum messages complement one another.

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According to the OECD Teaching Compass, teachers need agency, competencies, and supportive conditions to implement future-oriented curricula. This reinforces the proposition that implementation quality is an integral part of educational design (OECD, 2025).

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS

Life skills are mastered in a diversity of situations. Schools is capable of providing standardized resources, but students also cultivate communication, self-reliance, self-determination, as well as digital responsibility at home and in their communities. Family and community collaborations can consequently enhance mobility by connecting school tasks to real-world contexts. Approaches to making this connection visible include community mapping, local problem-solving ventures, intergenerational interviews, and service-learning activities.

Digital environments contribute to both opportunities and risks. Digital literacy should not be confused with the ability to operate devices or applications. Future-ready students must be able to assess the credibility of information, recognize manipulative content, protect their privacy, communicate responsibly, and understand that their actions online have social consequences. UNESCO's discussion of social and emotional learning situates relationships, responsible decision-making, and well-being within a larger educational ecosystem**.**

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND RISK MITIGATION

Table 9. Implementation challenges and mitigation responses

Challenge	How the problem may appear	Risk-mitigation response
Conceptual ambiguity	Different teachers use ‘life skills’ to mean unrelated behaviours	Create a school-level competency glossary and progression map
Curriculum overload	Life skills are added as another activity	Embed competencies within existing subjects and projects
Teacher readiness	Teachers know the policy language but lack practical strategies	Sustained professional learning, modelling, and collaborative planning
Assessment pressure	Only easily scored outcomes receive attention	Use portfolios, performance tasks and formative rubrics

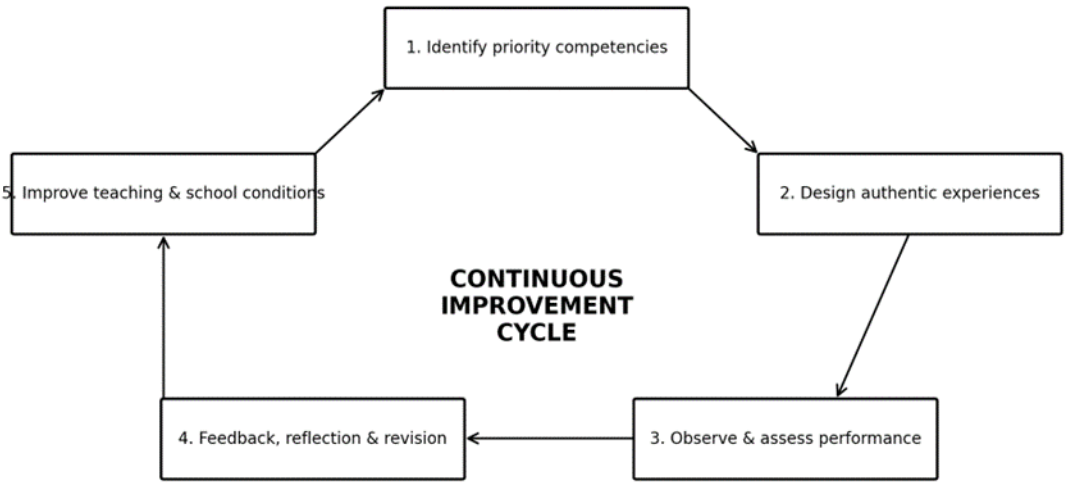
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Challenge	How the problem may appear	Risk-mitigation response
Superficial implementation	Occasional talks or annual workshops replace sustained practice	Plan repeated practice and reflection across the year
Cultural mismatch	Imported activities do not fit local realities	Adapt examples, language and community contexts with stakeholder input
Resource inequality	Technology or specialist programmes are unevenly available	Use low-cost activities and locally available materials
Employability reductionism	Life skills become narrowly job-oriented	Include well-being, ethics, citizenship, relationships and agency

These obstructions signal that deployment should be handled as an organizational challenge. If lesson plans, teacher preparation, scrutiny, and school processes all sway in opposing pathways, nonetheless the most powerful policy statement will be unproductive. Conversely, relatively simple classroom practices can become influential when repeated, coherent, and institutionalized.

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A CONTINUOUS IMPLEMENTATION CYCLE



Source: Author's original synthesis of competency-based curriculum, formative assessment and implementation principles.

Figure 2. Continuous implementation cycle for school-based life-skills education.

The proposed cycle intentionally evades the 'programme completed impact achieved' logic. Life skills education is a developmental process. Schools should focus on a few key competencies, create opportunities for practice, gather evidence, provide feedback, and revise instruction. Over time, the evidence can help to improve schools and teacher education. This cyclical approach is consistent with research demonstrating that implementation characteristics influence outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023).

RESEARCH AGENDA FOR INDIA

The current research offers a compelling argument for life-skills education, but it also uncovers multiple study avenues. Tiwari and Bajpai (2021) identified the need for stronger programme design and stakeholder involvement in the Indian context. Kirchhoff and Keller (2021) identified limited evidence on sustainable development of life skills, while the broader SEL literature demonstrates considerable variation in programme content and implementation quality.

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Table 10. Research priorities for NEP 2020-aligned life-skills education

Research priority	Recommended direction	Potential contribution
Developmental progression	Examine how competency expectations should change across school stages	Age-appropriate progression framework
Implementation fidelity	Document teacher enactment, dosage, adaptation, and school conditions	Evidence on what supports sustainability
Indian contextualisation	Study rural/urban, linguistic, socioeconomic, and school-type contexts	Locally relevant programme design
Assessment	Validate performance-based and mixed-method approaches	More authentic evidence of competency growth
Longitudinal transfer	Track whether skills appear in new academic and social settings	Evidence of durability and transfer
Teacher agency	Study professional learning and teacher decision-making	Implementation model for teacher education
Digital life skills	Examine critical information literacy, digital ethics, and responsible AI use	Future-oriented competency framework
Equity and inclusion	Examine accessibility for diverse learners	More inclusive life-skills pedagogy

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

1. **Curriculum planners** can map a manageable set of life-skill competencies across subjects and stages, rather than creating a single subject.
2. **Teachers can create** tasks that promote communication, collaboration, reasoning, decision-making, and reflection, rather than simply providing information about these behaviours.
3. **Teacher educators** can incorporate life-skills pedagogy, experiential learning, and competency-based assessment into pre-service and in-service programs.
4. **School leaders** can align timetables, student leadership, discipline practices, assessment, and recognition systems with common competency goals.

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5. **Partnering** with families and communities through authentic projects and community-linked learning can enhance transfer.
6. **Policymakers** can support implementation by providing progression frameworks, teacher resources, exemplar tasks, and quality monitoring mechanisms to prevent life skills from becoming just a compliance checklist.

CONCLUSION

The NEP 2020 offers an important opportunity to move life skills from the margins of education to the centre of learning design. The policy is significant not only because it explicitly mentions communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience, but also because it promotes holistic development, experiential learning, competency-based education, multidisciplinary learning, and formative assessment. The NCFSE 2023 provides additional support for making competencies and various forms of learning more visible in school practice.

The main point of this paper is that life skills should be viewed as an interconnected learning architecture. The five domains proposed here—self-management and resilience; communication and collaboration; critical and creative thinking; ethical decision-making and citizenship; and adaptability, digital competence, and lifelong learning—are not independent compartments. They interact during authentic learning experiences and are strengthened when teachers, peers, families, and school systems consistently provide opportunities for practice and reflection.

The policy-field relationship is reciprocal. The policy legitimizes the inclusion of life skills in the curriculum, and life skills give practical meaning to the policy's goals of holistic, experiential, and competency-based learning. The potential benefits for learners include increased agency, resilience, improved social competence, more responsible decision-making, adaptability, well-being, and better academic learning conditions.

The evidence base supports confidence in the educational relevance of such competencies, while cautioning against simplistic implementation claims. Large-scale reviews have found positive outcomes for school-based SEL, but variation in program design and implementation is still important (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). Indian reviews also highlight potential, as well as the need for improved program design, contextualization, and long-term evidence (Tiwari & Bajpai, 2021).

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Finally, the future-ready learner is more than just an advanced student. It is a learner who can apply knowledge with judgment, treat others with respect, respond to difficulties with adaptive strategies, critically evaluate information, participate responsibly, and continue to learn as conditions change. The educational task is thus to make these abilities part of everyday learning rather than occasional enrichment. In this regard, life-skills education can be one practical means of making NEP 2020's holistic aspirations visible in everyday school life.

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