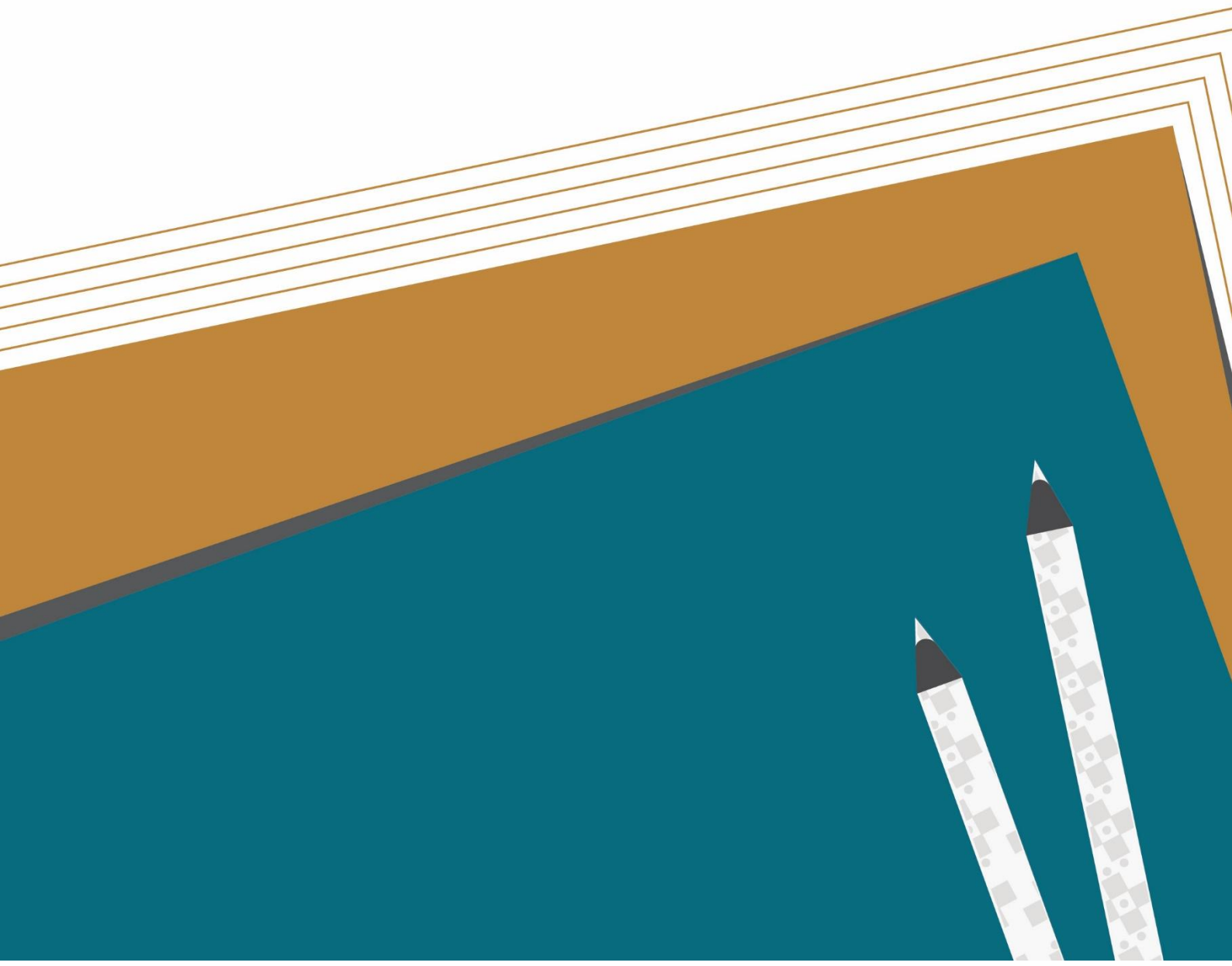


Exploring The Landscape of Competencies from Policy to Practice



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Introduction

Traditional curricula mainly prescribe content to be covered within a specific timeframe but did not define the knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions students needed to demonstrate [1]. Since traditional curricula did not outline clear endpoints, they often failed to differentiate between content that was "essential to know" and "good to know." As a result, these curricula became bloated and unwieldy. Teachers often hurried to "cover and finish" the curriculum, regardless of whether students had attained mastery.

Assessments under traditional systems were heavily summative and infrequent. This approach did not help students or teachers identify areas of strength and weakness, nor did it allow for timely adjustments if teaching learning activities were not effective. Grading students relative to one another through norm-referenced grading provided little useful information about individual learning progress. Moreover, this system fostered an atmosphere of competition and threat among students, rather than promoting collaboration and mutual learning. Thus, traditional education systems and curricula faced numerous challenges [1].

In light of these challenges, the Indian education system has begun to implement competency-based reforms aimed at enhancing overall educational quality to meet the evolving demands of the 21st century. In continuation with earlier policy and curriculum documents, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF-FS and NCF-SE) [10] establishes clear Learning Standards to guide policymakers, educational administrators, syllabus developers, parents, teachers, and students in understanding the intended educational outcomes. ***This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of various competency-based reforms implemented in India and explore the concept of learning standards, including their definitions, characteristics, and implications for effective teaching and learning.***

¹ This paper is selected for publication in upcoming issues of NCERT, Journal of Indian Education.

A Spotlight on Competency-Based Reforms in the Indian Educational System

Policymakers and administrators continuously reflect on and critically assess the quality of learning, seeking to identify problems with low learning levels and explore ways to improve them. These improvements are primarily understood in terms of educational outcomes and processes. Educational outcomes, as perceived by the majority of stakeholders, signify quality through students' achievement of desired goals. To support this, it is crucial to establish clearly defined learning standards that represent expectations for student learning. These standards articulate consistent expectations for all while allowing stakeholders the flexibility to select materials and methods that meet those expectations. As a result, these standards ensure equity, accommodate diversity, and promote autonomy for teachers.

Another important aspect of quality focuses on the means that lead to desired outcomes—the educational processes. These processes, which include pedagogy, classroom assessment, teaching-learning resources, capacity-building initiatives for teachers, school accessibility, dropout rates, transition rates, enrollment, facilities, pupil-teacher ratio, and the number of teachers, contribute significantly to achieving educational outcomes.

Over the past several years, educational policy documents in India have emphasized both aspects of quality (outcomes and processes) at various levels, depending on the context and the needs of society. There has been a sustained effort toward competency-based reforms by establishing learning standards that encompass Minimum Learning Levels (MLLs), learning outcomes, and competencies as indicated in Figure 1. This approach serves as the foundation for assessing the quality of education.

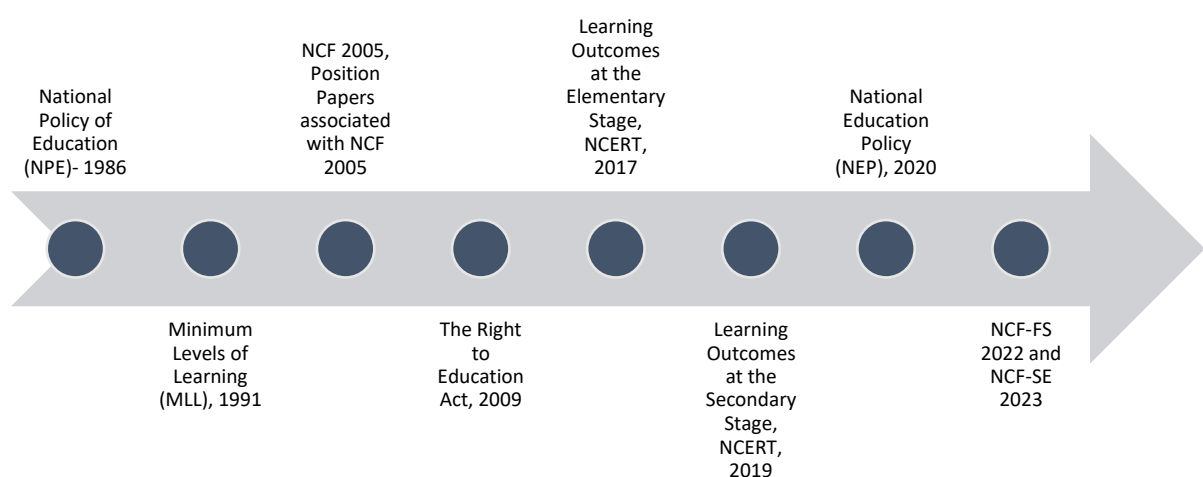


Figure 1: Competency Based Reforms in India

In the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968 [3], quality in education was defined in terms of access and retention, with a focus on expanding educational facilities by providing schools in rural habitations. Consequently, schooling facilities were established in over 90% of rural regions within a 1km radius. In the NPE of 1986 [3], the emphasis shifted to quality not only in terms of access but also in the conditions for success. The recommendation was to establish minimum levels of learning for each stage of schooling, introducing an additional dimension of learning standards to the concept of quality.

In the Plan of Action (POA) of 1992 [4], it was noted that the large-scale expansion had led to the establishment of educational facilities with widely varying quality, encompassing institutional infrastructure, teaching-learning processes, and the quality of students graduating from these institutions. The need to draft Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL) [4] emerged from the fundamental principle that, regardless of caste, creed, location, or gender, all children should have access to education of a comparable standard. The primary objective behind the formulation of the MLL initiative was to address issues of equity and reduce existing disparities in education. Two basic considerations kept in view while formulating the MLLs were: (i) the cognitive capabilities of the children at different classes or grades corresponding to different stage of development; and (ii) the empirical reality in terms of the enabling environmental conditions that characterize the primary education programmes.

The Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs) developed class-wise and subject-wise for the primary stage in 1992 for Language, Math and EVS. These were presented as competencies, were highly product-oriented and had a limited scope for assessing the overall development of children as shown in Box 1.

Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL)- A few examples from Class 1- Language- Oral expression

- Recite simple rhymes, poems and songs in a group with gestures and actions.
- Repeat simple sentences correctly.
- Answer simple questions requiring yes/no, answers.
- Ask simple questions.

A radical shift occurred almost a decade ago as stated in National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 [5], when the child's capacity to construct knowledge as a natural learner was recognized as central to the curriculum's transaction, and the teacher's role was primarily seen as a facilitator of the learning process. The knowledge gained is from their engagement with the world, wherein they explore, respond, invent, and derive meaning. This shift signifies a focus on the process of learning itself. NCF 2005 and its associated position papers articulated the general and subject-specific aims of education. They also provided subject-specific and stage-specific recommendations on the features of good quality curricula, assessments, and pedagogy.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, [6] came into being to enforce education as a fundamental right as enshrined in Article 21a of the Constitution of India. The RTE Act, 2009 specifies that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards. As a step towards providing specified standards as per RTE act, NCERT published curricular expectations and learning outcomes for children in classes 1 to 8 in 2017 [7]. Learning outcomes for students in the secondary stage were published in 2019 [8]. Draft learning outcomes have been published for the higher secondary stage as well. A few examples are shown in Box 2.

While MLLs primarily addressed demonstrable and measurable skills, a more holistic approach was taken to draft learning outcomes that defined knowledge, skills and dispositions that a child can attain at the end of a class. In MLLs, non-cognitive areas such as equality, cooperation, sense of responsibility, etc were spelled out differently.

Box 2

NCERT Learning Outcomes- A few examples from Class 1- Language- Oral expression

- Recites poems/rhymes with actions.
- Responds orally (in any language including sign language) to comprehension questions related to stories/poems.
- Identifies characters and sequence of a story and asks questions about the story.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [9] envisages a combination of experiential learning, formative assessments, and competency-based systems in improving the quality of student learning (MHRD, 2020, p. 12, para 4.6). The assessments, whether formative or summative, will be competency-based and aligned to the learning outcomes for the specified grade levels (MHRD, 2020, p. 17, para 4.34). The recently published NCF [10] includes stage specific competencies for foundational, preparatory, middle and secondary stages. A few examples are shown in Box 3. These are learning achievements that are observable and can be assessed systematically. These competencies are derived from the curricular goals and are expected to be attained by the end of a stage. Teachers can define the class specific learning outcomes which will act as interim markers of learning achievement towards the attainment of competencies. They are defined based on the specifics of the socio-cultural contexts, the materials and resources available, and contingencies of the classroom.

Box 3

NCF-SE Competencies- A few examples from Preparatory Stage- Oral expression

- Converses fluently and meaningfully in different contexts.
- Summarises core ideas from material read out in class.
- Makes oral presentations (show and tell, short welcome notes, anchoring of small events, short speeches, class debates).

Considerations for Framing Competencies and Implications on Pedagogy and Assessment

In NCF, competencies are designed with specific considerations in mind. Understanding these considerations will help teachers plan pedagogy and assessments that aligns with learning standards. In this context, it is crucial to delve into the competencies associated with each subject and stage, addressing questions such as: What is the nature of the stage-wise competencies? Where are these competencies derived from? How can these competencies be used to scaffold students learning? How are formative and summative assessments and pedagogy designed in relation to these competencies? Following are a few important considerations-

1. The attainment of competencies leads to the achievement of the aims of education

It is difficult to strike a balance between the education benefits for an individual, for the society in terms of greater common good and competitive economic growth. In the presence of educational standards, often our focus might go to the kind of learning that is measurable, but it is important to focus on the aspects of learning that is not directly measurable straightaway so as to achieve the desired broad aims of education. While competencies help in breaking down abstract aims of education to more concrete indicators to make them attainable, it is important that this interlinkage is understood well and kept in mind during every process in education. For example, the topic of water cycle in middle stage helps students to develop observation skills and draw conclusions from their observations. Apart from this, learning about water cycle also helps to raise awareness about the importance of conserving and protecting water resources, water pollution and its impact on human and environmental health. Therefore, pedagogy and assessments should be designed in a manner that it not only helps in inculcating observation skills but also helps a teacher to understand if children are able to appreciate the interface of Science and Society. In such a context, it becomes extremely crucial to use variety of pedagogy and assessment methods- concept maps to help students understand the components of water cycle, journals where students can record water cycle related phenomenon in their daily lives, conduct hands on experiments, build models, conduct focused group discussions, etc.

2. Competencies are specific to a subject

Each competency statement reflects the unique nature of its respective subject and encompasses subject-specific knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions as shown in Box 4. Recognizing these attributes allows teachers to design instruction that directly addresses the specific needs of each discipline. For instance, language instruction can focus on communication and creative expression, math can emphasize problem-solving techniques, science can foster observation skills and scientific thinking, and social science can help students interpret sources and understand cause and effect, among other aspects. Additionally, understanding the competencies encourages interdisciplinary

teaching strategies; for example, linking scientific observation skills with math concepts can help students see connections between subjects, enhancing overall comprehension and retention.

Box 4

Competency: Appreciates similarities and differences across languages in a multilingual classroom and society.

- Knowledge- Knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, Social and contemporary issues.
- Capacities- Creative expression, Ability to switch and mix code, Discourse analysis.
- Values and Dispositions- Appreciation of diversity, Sensitivity.

Competency: Explains cause and effect relationship between phenomenon, events, and their occurrences.

- Knowledge- Knowledge of events, phenomenon, dates, Knowledge of effects, impacts, change.
- Capacities- Relate cause and effect, Critical thinking, Decision making, Enquiry.
- Values and Dispositions- Sensitivity towards environmental and societal issues.

3. Competencies are specific to a stage of schooling

Different sets of competencies are defined for the four stages of schooling- Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, and Secondary- reflecting a progression that aligns with children's developmental stages, including physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language growth. These definitions consider the complexity and difficulty appropriate for each stage, recognizing that learning is a continuum. This progression allows children to attain desired competencies at their own pace and comfort level. An example is shown in Figure 2.

When teachers understand this progression across competencies, they can effectively plan stage-wise pedagogy and assessment, preparing students for the next level of learning. For instance, a math teacher who recognizes this progression will focus on mastering basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) in early grades before introducing fractions and decimals and later advancing to algebraic expressions and equations. The teacher can design targeted instruction and assessments that not only build a solid foundation in each area but also help students gain confidence as they transition to more complex mathematical concepts. Ultimately, this approach enhances students' overall mathematical proficiency.

Preparatory stage	Middle stage	Secondary stage
•Writes clear and coherent paragraphs that convey their understanding of a given topic/concept or on a reading of a text.	•Writes different kinds of letters, essays, and reports using appropriate style and registers for different audiences and purposes. •Writes prose, poetry, and drama using appropriate style and language.	•Writes in different styles (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive) from their own experiences and experiences of others. •Writes for real-life situations (invitations, speeches, condolence messages, notices, creative slogans, advertisements) and for school newsletter/magazine/ journal.

Figure 2: Competencies related to writing skills for preparatory, middle and secondary stages

4. Competencies ensures both equality and equity in education

Equality asserts that every student should have equal access to a high-quality education, irrespective of their background. Also, same set of competencies should be considered regardless of students' circumstances, abilities, or experiences. Equity recognizes that different students need different resources to achieve the same set of competencies as their peers. While equality focuses on what is fair within the group, equity highlights what is fair for an individual student. For example, for the given competency statement in Box 5, a teacher might choose to use passages of different complexity level based on students' prerequisite knowledge and the current learning level.

Box 5

Competency- Analyses and appreciates a point of view or cultural experience as reflected in the text; presents orally or in writing.

Passage 1: India's agriculture sector, while being a critical source of livelihood for a large part of the population, faces numerous challenges such as declining soil fertility, water scarcity, and increasing demand for food. The sector is further complicated by issues such as land ownership rights, fragmented markets, and limited access to credit and technology. The Indian government has implemented various policies and programs aimed at addressing these challenges, however their impact has been limited due to factors such as corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of effective implementation. To ensure food security and improve the lives of farmers, it is crucial that these challenges are addressed through a combination of government intervention, private sector engagement, and community involvement.

Passage 2: The Taj Mahal is an iconic mausoleum located in Agra, India. It was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal and is considered one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture. The Taj Mahal is made of white marble and is decorated with intricate carvings and inlaid precious stones. Every year, millions of visitors come from all over the world to admire its beauty and grandeur. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983 and remains one of India's most popular tourist destinations.

5. Competencies are defined in a manner that they are observable and assessable

All the Competency statements are expressed in terms of skill to be demonstrated and content to be acquired by the students. Each statement consists of a verb and a noun [11]. The verb describes the measurable and observable cognitive skill, and the noun describes the content as shown in Figure 3.

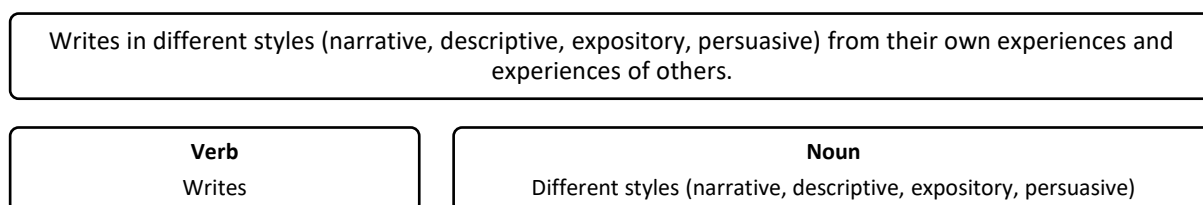


Figure 3: Structure of competency statements

Along with cognitive skill and content, there is also an aspect of values and dispositions in every competency statement. For example, for the competency in Figure 3, 'own experiences and experiences of others' reflect values and dispositions.

When it comes to assessment for such competencies, it is important to use a variety of assessment techniques to be able to assess children in a holistic manner. If we are assessing the skill of writing, instead of basing our decision about students' attainment of competency in one kind of assessment—say writing a persuasive essay—it will be crucial to assess if children are able to reflect on their learning, collaborate and brainstorm in the process of learning, understand the different components of a written piece in terms of the characters and events, etc. Similarly, the skill of writing can be assessed in terms of students' ability to summarize complex texts, critically examine the writer's point of view, construct personal point of view, express ideas using an interconnected and logical flow, organize writing with proper beginning, middle & end and use grammatically correct sentences.

6. Competencies enable in the design of valid, reliable and fair assessments

Valid, reliable, and fair assessments help teachers gather meaningful evidence of student learning, contributing to a more effective learning process. Assessments are valid when designed with reference

to a set of competencies. The attainment of each competency should be understood as a progression, aiding in the identification of students' abilities concerning the chosen competency. For instance, assessments designed for the oral expression competency help determine if students can express themselves verbally, construct sentences, or relate their thoughts to personal experiences. Additionally, gathering multiple pieces of evidence of student learning is crucial for ensuring consistency in assessments. For example, when assessing a competency that focuses on describing the interdependence among animals, plants, and humans, teachers can choose methods such as group discussions, role plays, or worksheets. The results of each assessment method can then be triangulated to obtain a holistic understanding of student learning. Also, fairness is an essential quality in competency-based assessments. Students should be aware of their starting point, their current position in the learning progression, the next steps in their learning journey, and the criteria by which they will be assessed. To facilitate this, teachers can guide students in unpacking the competencies, familiarizing them with the assessment rubrics, and eliminating any ambiguity about expectations. This approach promotes students' ownership and responsibility for their learning.

To conclude

This paper underscores the importance of competency-based reforms as a means to enhance the quality of education in our country. By ensuring that teaching-learning processes, curricular content, and assessments are aligned with these competencies, the desired aims of education can be achieved. Several strategies should be considered for the effective implementation of these competencies:

- Teachers must ensure that the classroom pedagogy, teaching-learning modules, resources, formative and summative assessments, and the reporting of student learning levels should all be aligned with the established competencies. Such initiative will not only ensure a cohesive educational experience but also help students attain the defined learning standards.
- Administrative structures must provide the necessary resources and support. This includes professional development for teachers, access to instructional materials, a supportive learning environment, and the creation of frameworks that facilitate the implementation of competency-based reforms. By investing in the professional growth of teachers and ensuring that schools are well-resourced, an ecosystem can be fostered where teachers are well prepared and equipped to plan as per the competency standards.
- Collaborative learning communities of peer teachers should be established, allowing educators to share experiences, challenges, and resources related to competency-based education.

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This article is selected for publication in NCERT, Journal of Indian Education, October-December 2025 issue. This article can be cited as-

Exploring The Landscape of Competencies from Policy to Practice, Assessment resources, 2024, Azim Premji University

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