

Building blocks to a better future: The urgent need to focus on early years

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While the fundamental importance of good early childhood education has been known for a long time, the draft National Education Policy (NEP) that was released in early June 2019 makes a very clear statement about the "severe learning crisis" and its connection to what is currently happening with young children in the country. The voluminous policy document points out that a very large number of children currently in elementary school do not have foundational literacy and numeracy skills. The draft NEP estimates that close to 5 crore (i.e. 50 million children) are behind or have fallen behind and that once children fall behind, they are unable to catch up.

Right in the first chapter, the draft NEP points out that the major part of this crisis happens well before children even enter Std I. The document cites several reasons for this. First, many children enter school before age 6. This is partly due to the lack of affordable and accessible options for pre-schooling. As a consequence, too many children enter school with limited exposure to early childhood education. As with everything else, children from poor families have a double disadvantage; lack of healthcare and nutrition on one side and the absence of a supportive learning environment on the other. Although the anganwadi network across India is huge, by and large, school readiness or early childhood development and education activities have not had high priority in the ICDS system. Private pre-schools that are mushrooming in urban and rural communities have increased access to pre-school education but are often designed to be a downward extension of schooling. Thus, they bring in school-like features into the pre-school classroom, rather than developmentally appropriate activities by age and phase.

Does available evidence back the statements made by the draft NEP?

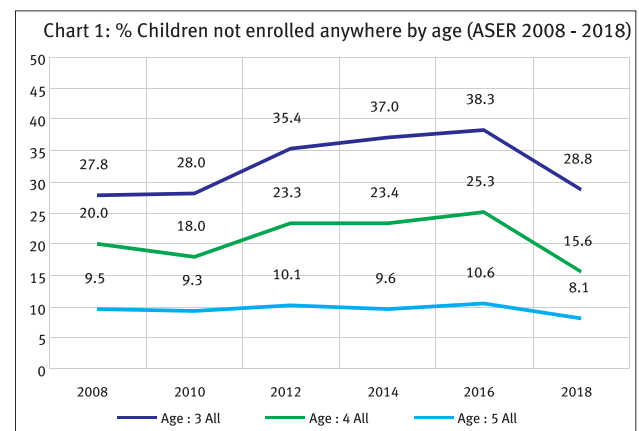
In 2005, the first year we did ASER, we focussed on 6- to 14-year-olds and on those who were or should have been studying in elementary grades - Std I till Std VIII. Several years later the Right to Education Act also referred to this age group when free and compulsory education became the law.

However, even in the first year of ASER, going from household to household, talking to thousands of families we could see that there were children who were in Std I who were not as yet 6 years old. Therefore, from 2006 onwards we expanded the focus of the ASER exercise to include 5-year-olds in the survey. Any child who was enrolled in Std I was asked to do reading and arithmetic tasks; even if the child was 5 years old. We also asked about the enrollment status of younger children - age 3 and 4.²

Over the last fifteen years, ASER has become well known for generating estimates of basic reading and arithmetic levels for children in the elementary school age group. What is less well known is that in ASER there is rich data over time about the educational status of children below the age of 6. Looking at this dataset, three clear trends are visible. To begin with, there is considerable scope for expanding the outreach of anganwadis for children in the age group 3 and 4. Next, the proportion of children who are already in Std I but not yet age 6 continues to be high. All India data from ASER 2018 indicates that close to a third of all children enrolled in Std I are less than 6 years old. Third, going early into formal schooling leaves the younger children at a huge disadvantage; in the same grade, older children are able to do much more than their younger friends.

Let us discuss each of these trends one by one.

The need to expand anganwadi coverage: Chart 1 outlines the urgent need for greater outreach for early childhood education and development. Based on data collected from 2008 onwards, it is clear that there is potential for bringing many more children into the anganwadi network. All India data (2018) shows that slightly below 30% children at age 3 and 15.6% of children at age 4 are not enrolled anywhere.³



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² ASER was done in practically every rural district of India for the period 2006 to 2014. On the 10th year of the ASER exercise a decision was taken to do the nationwide ASER every alternate year.

³ While the method of measurement remained the same between 2005 to and 2016, in 2018 a more detailed classification of what children were doing from age 4 onwards was put in place.

But these figures (Chart 1) for children at age 3 and 4 who are not enrolled anywhere are much higher in states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In this age group being in an anganwadi may increase exposure to developmental activities appropriate for this age. Expanding access to anganwadis would be an incremental step that would strengthen the impact of the existing early childhood provision that is already in place.

Early entry to formal schooling: It is commonly assumed that children enter Std I at age 6 and that they proceed year by year from Std I to Std VIII reaching the end of elementary school by age 14. The Right to Education Act 2009 also refers to free and compulsory education for the age group 6 to 14. However, the situation on the ground is quite different.

A closer look at age 5 also provides important clues for how what children are doing at this young age influences their later chances in education and in life. For example, even if we look at the all India age 5 cohort in 2018 we can see that 28.1% are still enrolled in anganwadi, a similar proportion (27.5%) are in private LKG/UKG and 23.3% are enrolled in government schools and a little under 10% are enrolled in private schools. 8.1% are not enrolled in any kind of pre-school or school (Table 1).⁴ Those who are in school at this age would usually be in Std I but it is possible that a few may be in higher classes too.

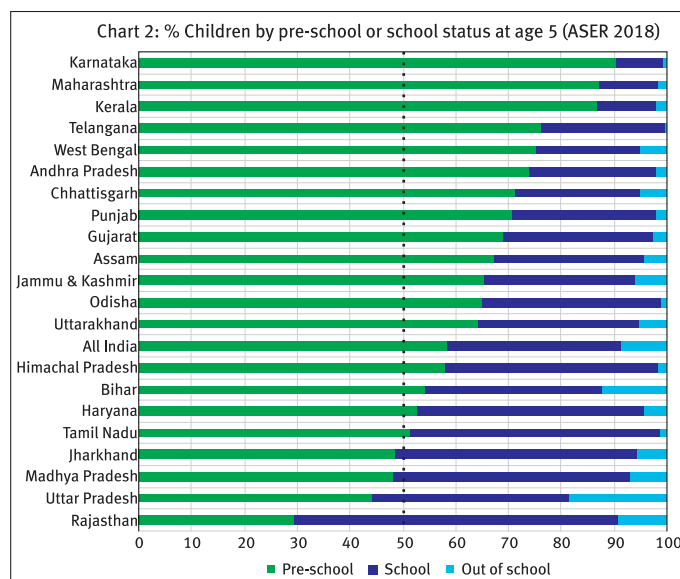
At age 5 across India, there are big differences across states about where children are enrolled at age 5. In Chart 2 alongside, pre-school refers to enrollment in anganwadis, government pre-primary grades and in private LKG/UKG. School refers to enrollment in either private schools or government schools.

Putting together all those who are in school, we see that this figure is one third of all children in this age group. Interestingly, if the type of pre-school or school is considered, about half of all children age 5 are in government institutions (anganwadi and government schools) and close to 40% are in private institutions (private LKG/UKG and private schools). Depending on where they are enrolled, children get different opportunities for development and learning.

After several decades of efforts to universalize elementary education, there is widespread understanding of the importance of schooling. In fact, parents who have not had much education themselves have high educational aspirations for their children. Enrollment in formal schools at any early age is a consequence of what can be seen as 'over universalization' of elementary education. Children as young as three or even less are enrolled in pre-schools and play schools, especially in urban areas and in middle income and high income families. The belief that more years of schooling is better than less and that the sooner the child enters 'school', the faster she or he will be ready for future learning is held by many people. In any case, in most private schools, parents are encouraged to bring their children at age 4 or 5 into kindergarten (LKG or UKG) and not directly into Std I. Poorer parents, who cannot find accessible or affordable pre-school alternatives and who do not see anganwadis as an option for education will often enroll their children into the nearest government school. These patterns lead to very different age distributions in Std I in government school and private school.

Table 1: % Children enrolled in different types of pre-schools and schools by age 2018

Age	Pre-school			School			Not enrolled	Total
	Anganwadi	Govt pre-primary	Pvt LKG/UKG	Govt	Pvt	Other		
Age 3	57.1	1.0	10.0	2.0	1.0	0.1	28.8	100
Age 4	50.5	2.1	23.4	5.3	3.0	0.2	15.6	100
Age 5	28.1	2.8	27.5	23.3	9.8	0.3	8.1	100
Age 6	7.6	1.9	16.4	49.5	20.7	0.5	3.3	100
Age 7	1.8	0.8	7.3	59.1	28.7	0.6	1.8	100
Age 8	0.7	0.4	3.3	62.6	30.8	0.7	1.5	100



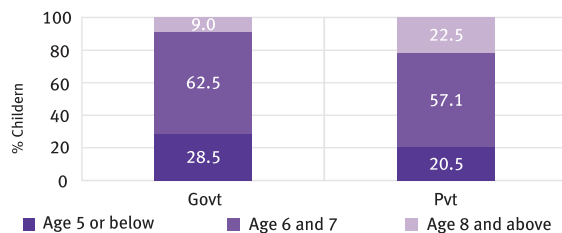
⁴ASER Centre (2019). Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018 - 'Young Children'.

Age implications for learning: Data from ASER 2018 clearly shows that of all children enrolled in Std I in rural India, 35.6% are enrolled in private schools and 64.4% in government schools. In private schools, only 20.5% of children are age 5 or younger whereas this number is 28.5% in government schools. Similarly, there are 22.5% children in private schools who are 8 or older but the figure for government schools is less than 10% (Table 2 and Chart 3)⁵. All India patterns do not reveal the wide variations in age distribution in Std I in different kinds of schools; these lopsided patterns are more acute in some states.

Table 2: % Children enrolled in Std I by school type 2018

% Children in Std I enrolled in	Govt	Pvt	Total
	64.4	35.6	100

Chart 3: % Children enrolled in Std I by age and school type 2018



This chart shows the distribution of enrollment in Std I in different types of schools by age.

Table 3: Reading and arithmetic levels for Std I children by age and school type 2018

Age	% Children who	
	Can read at least letters	Can recognize at least numbers (1-9)
Government schools		
Age 5	33.0	38.7
Age 6 and 7	50.0	57.8
Age 8 and above	58.3	68.9
All	46.8	54.4
Private schools		
Age 5	57.1	63.4
Age 6 and 7	79.0	84.4
Age 8 and above	86.3	92.1
All	77.0	82.7

This table shows the proportion of children in Std I who can read at least letters and recognize at least numbers up to 9.

Even a cursory look at all India data from ASER 2018 for reading and arithmetic in Std I indicates that even in the same grade and same type of school, older children can do more than younger children. The difference in a 5-year-old's ability to recognize numbers can be up to 30 percentage points less than that of an 8-year-old (Table 3).

Enrolling children into formal schooling when they are too young may be an important reason why these children remain academically behind others through their school life. ASER data over time shows that in Std I, the proportion of younger children is falling over time in private schools (Chart 4 and 5). As it is children in rural India who are enrolled in private schools come from families with more education and a higher level of resources. This advantage is further strengthened by reducing the age disadvantage.

Chart 4: % Children in Std I who are 5 years old (All India)

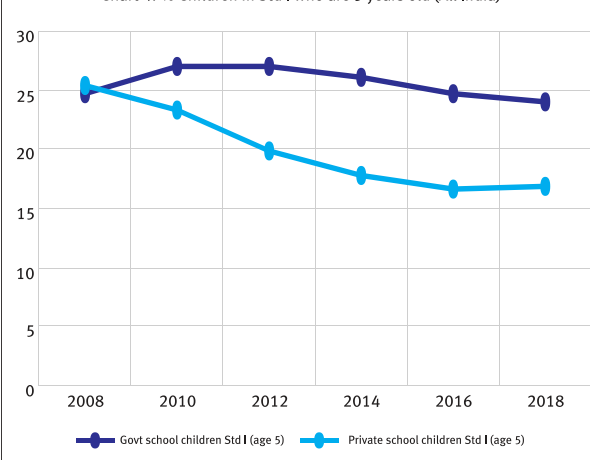
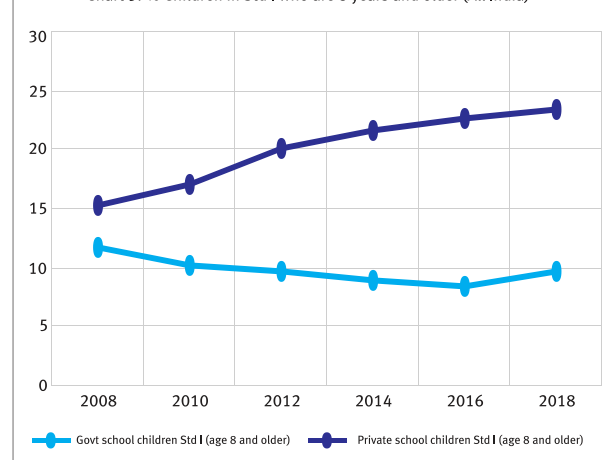


Chart 5: % Children in Std I who are 8 years and older (All India)



⁵ASER Centre (2019). Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018 - 'Young Children'.

Available data and evidence strongly reinforce the recommendations suggested by the draft NEP document released in June 2019. For the future of India, these policy directions need to be taken very seriously. ASER data over the years provides some understanding of the patterns and practices based on ground realities. Other research studies like the longitudinal research done in the India Early Childhood Education Impact Study (IECEI)⁶ 2017 also provide important insights into what is happening with young children, their schooling and learning in India today. Understanding challenges that children face when they are young is critical if we want to solve these problems early in children's lives rather than waiting till much later to attempt remedial action which is harder to do. The entire ASER 2019 effort was designed to explore more deeply where young children are and what they can do. More studies need to be undertaken that provide empirical evidence for the situation on the ground so that practical and feasible policy decisions can be taken.

Research and data gathering is needed not only to inform high level policy. It is equally important to think about what information is needed to guide practice on the ground. The push from draft New Education Policy document to pay attention to this early age group should lead to more detailed tracking and mapping for the provisions that already exist at macro and micro levels. In many communities, anganwadis are already located inside the government school compound or very close to it. Any planning for a pre-primary class in the government school needs to take into consideration what exists, how that functions and how existing structures and processes can be adapted to strengthen current delivery and also how that can dovetail into anything new that is brought in. In fact, detailed mapping can also help to maximize the impact of the expenditures being done by the ICDS department and the school system.

The gap between policy and practice is also very visible in what happens inside pre-schools and pre-primary grades. In fact, the early years space (age 4 to 8) in India can be seen like a 'see-saw'. Large number of young children are enrolled in anganwadis. But within the anganwadi system, early childhood education is not given the priority it needs. Although children are in anganwadis, they are not benefitting to the extent that is possible in terms of getting children ready for school. At the same time, increasing numbers of children are entering private pre-schools and pre-primary grades. But even as the name suggests, the activities at this stage are very much like a downward extension of schooling. Therefore, for different reasons, neither the government provision nor the private delivery is able to adequately provide exposure to developmentally appropriate "breadth of skills" that

children need at this age. On the pedagogy side, a reworking of curriculum and activities is urgently needed for the entire age band from age 4 to 8, cutting across all types of pre-schools and early grades regardless of whether the provision is by government institutions or by private agencies.

Anyone looking closely at the status of young children in India will completely agree with the draft NEP statement that early childhood education has the potential to be the "greatest and most powerful equalizer" (p.46). 2020 marks the 10th anniversary of the RTE Act. This is the best moment to focus on the youngest cohorts before and during their entry to formal schooling and ensure that ten years later they complete secondary school as well-equipped and well-rounded citizens of India.



⁶Kaul, V., Bhattacharjea, S., Chaudhary, A. B., Ramanujan, P., Banerji, M., & Nanda, M. (2017). The India Early Childhood Education Impact Study. New Delhi: UNICEF.