

Big changes in the early years landscape

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In the four-year period since the last national field-based ASER survey was conducted in 2018, several factors have altered the education landscape for young children in the pre-school age group (roughly age 3 to 5). The unintended changes are those that are a consequence of the pandemic-induced closure of pre-schools and schools for about 2 years – a very long time in the lives of young children. But there were also other changes during this period that were intended to influence the organisation of pre-school education in India.

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, 2018 saw an important change in how the government of India envisaged early childhood education – a process that had already begun several years earlier, with the release of the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education in 2013. Launched in 2018, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan's Integrated Scheme on School Education aimed to address school education 'holistically without segmentation from pre-nursery to Class 12'. Prior to 2018, the formal school system had regarded Std I of primary school as its entry point,² entirely separate from the government's primary mechanism for offering pre-school education to young children via the ICDS Anganwadi Centres, or AWCs, that fall under the Ministry of Women and Child Development. This new scheme encouraged states to co-locate AWCs in government primary schools or else provide up to two years of pre-primary classes prior to Std I, thus taking a first step towards ensuring a seamless transition between these two key stages in children's educational journeys.

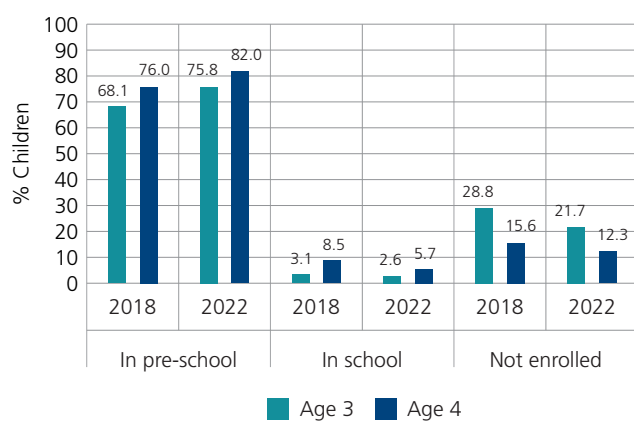
The impetus for integrating pre-school and school education took another giant step forward with the release of the National Education Policy, or NEP, in 2020. This new policy did three things simultaneously: it acknowledged the vital importance of early childhood education, elevated it to the status of school education, and integrated it into the continuum of educational opportunities offered to children. It did this by envisioning age 3-8 as a single integrated 'foundational' stage in a child's education, consisting of 3 years of pre-primary education and the first two years of primary school. This stage would offer a continuum of access, to be provided by expanding and strengthening the existing network of standalone AWCs, co-located AWCs, and pre-primary classes in schools; as well as a continuum of learning opportunities, to be achieved by developing a new curricular and pedagogical framework for the foundational stage.

How did these forces – major policy changes, as well as extended school closures caused by a global pandemic – alter young children's participation in pre-school and early primary grades? Unlike the formal school education system where far more information on schools, teachers, and students is available today than there was a decade ago, the information available on pre-primary institutions, facilities, staff, and enrollments is still fragmented and incomplete. It may be years before we have clear picture of how this 4-year period altered the landscape of educational provisioning, participation, and outcomes for young children. Comparing ASER data from 2018 with 2022, it is possible to identify some initial trends.

Enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds increased

Many observers expected that after remaining closed for such a long period, children and their families would find it difficult to return to school, resulting in higher dropout rates and lower enrollments in educational institutions. An important finding that emerges for all age groups, including the youngest learners, is that this is far from the case. The ASER phone surveys of 2020 and 2021³ found that parents' belief in the importance of education was strong even while schools were closed. Results from ASER 2022 show that this commitment to children's education is stronger than ever: in 2022 in rural India, 75.8% of 3-year-olds and 82% of 4-year-olds are enrolled in some form of pre-school, an increase of 7.7 and 6 percentage points respectively over 2018 levels (Chart 1). The fraction of children in this age group not enrolled anywhere has fallen sharply. Equally important, the

Chart 1: Enrollment status of 3- and 4-year-olds. All India. 2018 and 2022



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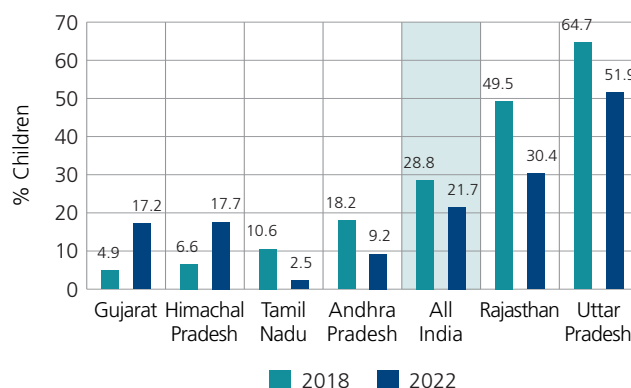
² With some exceptions. Punjab was an early adopter of pre-primary classes in school, even prior to 2018; and states like Assam offered pre-primary classes prior to Std I in some schools. But these were exceptions rather than the norm.

³ The ASER reports for these and other years are available at: www.asercentre.org

proportion of these young children who were already enrolled in primary school grades – a not insignificant figure in 2018, especially among 4-year-olds – has also dropped. Not just evidence of a remarkable recovery from a devastating pandemic, these data reflect clear progress towards the NEP objective of universal early childhood development, care, and education by 2030.

As with all national estimates, these averages hide considerable and sometimes surprising variations across states. A close look at the state-wise trends in enrollment of 3-year-olds, for example, reveals that states that were doing the best in this regard – those with almost all 3-year-olds enrolled in 2018 – were not always able to regain these remarkable coverage levels post school reopening in 2022. Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh are two examples of states where the proportion of 3-year-olds not enrolled anywhere was low in 2018 and increased by more than 10 percentage points in 2022 (Chart 2). On the other hand, states with moderate or high proportions of young children unreached by pre-school programs in 2018, such as Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, did very much better at reaching and enrolling these children in 2022 – even though they still have a long way to go to achieve the universal coverage envisaged by the NEP. Several of the southern states, such as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, have been among the most successful in enrolling 3-year-old children.

Chart 2: Proportion of 3-year-olds not enrolled anywhere. Selected states. 2018 and 2022

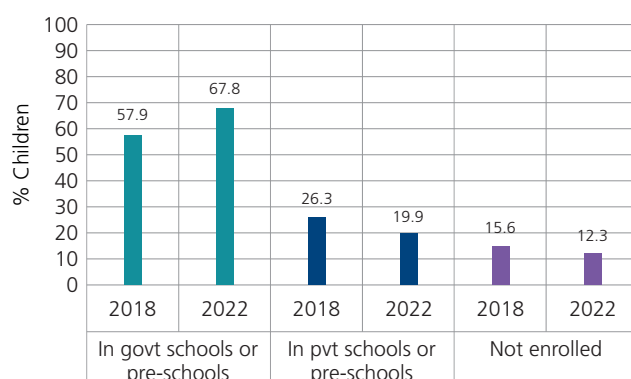


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Young children moved from private to government institutions

ASER 2022 enrollment data shows a shift from private to government institutions at all levels of schooling, unsurprising given the loss of livelihoods and financial distress experienced by households during the pandemic as well as the reported closure of many low-cost private schools. This pattern is visible among young children as well. At the national level, the shift from private to government institutions is especially visible in the case of 4-year-olds, more than a quarter of whom were enrolled in private institutions (pre-schools or schools) in 2018 (Chart 3). Nationally, enrollment of 4-year-olds in government pre-schools or schools increased by 10 percentage points, such that in 2022 more than two thirds of all 4-year-olds (67.8%) are enrolled in government institutions, the vast majority in ICDS Anganwadis.

Chart 3: Enrollment of 4-year olds in different types of pre-schools and schools. All India. 2018 and 2022

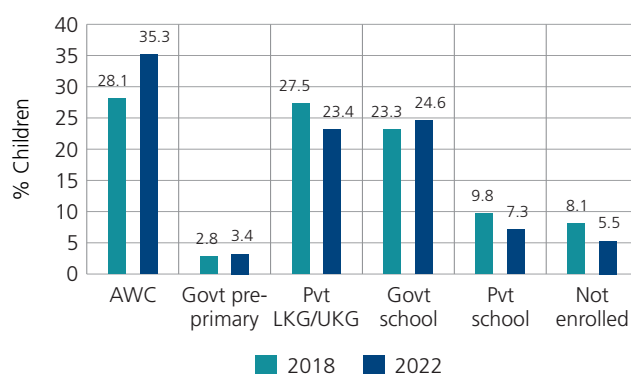


A third of 5-year-olds continue to be in primary school

Major national policy documents – the Right to Education Act (2009), the Early Childhood Care and Education policy (2013), and the National Education Policy (2020) all reiterate that children should enter Std I of primary school at age 6. However, on the ground, institutional guidelines for what 5-year-olds can do vary both by state as well as by type of institution. For example, ICDS Anganwadis offer pre-school education to children in the 3-6 age group, while many state governments allow children to enter Std I at age 5. These ambiguities have resulted in 5-year-old children being enrolled in many different forms and levels of educational provision.

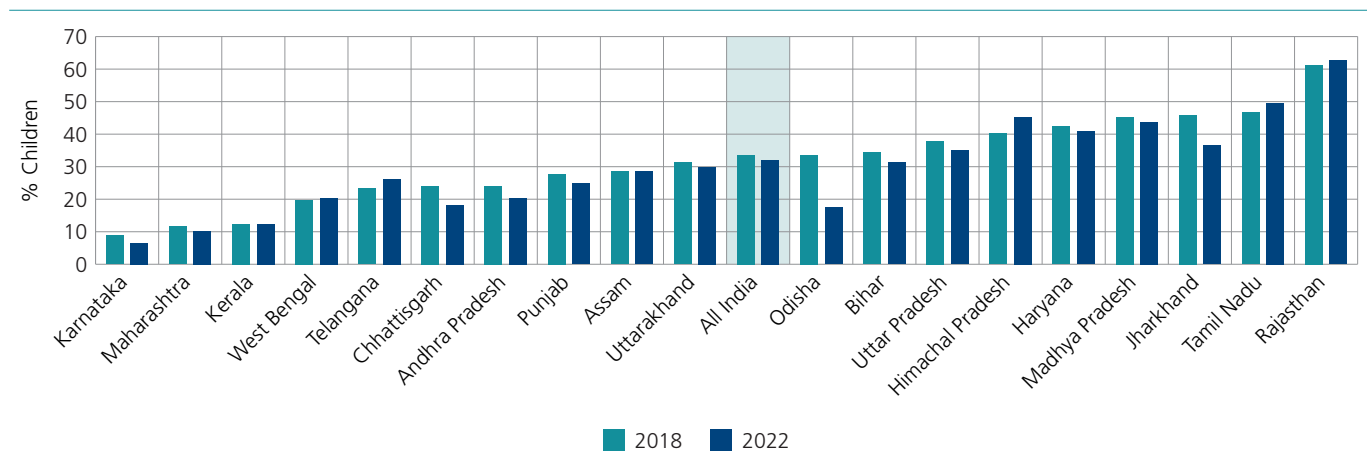
In 2018, at the all India level, about 8% of 5-year-olds were not enrolled anywhere. Of those who were enrolled, roughly equal proportions were enrolled in AWCs, in private LKG/UKG classes, and in (government or private) primary schools (Chart 4). In 2022, some trends among these 5-year-old children are similar to those observed among the 3- and 4-

Chart 4: Enrollment of 5-year-olds in different types of pre-schools and schools. All India. 2018 and 2022



year-olds. First, the proportion of children out of school decreased substantially over 2018 levels (from 8% to 5.5%). Second, among enrolled 5-year-olds, there is a clear shift from private to government pre-schools and schools. However, despite national policy prescriptions, the overall proportion of 5-year-olds enrolled in primary school (government or private) has hardly changed between 2018 and 2022. Both then and now, approximately 1 in every 3 children age 5 is enrolled in primary school. Further, unlike many other indicators, this national level finding does not fluctuate much across individual states. States such as Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, which had very high proportions of 5-year-olds enrolled in school in 2018, have similar levels in 2022; whereas states with few 5-year-olds in school in 2018, such as Karnataka and Maharashtra, still show the same pattern four years later (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Proportion of 5-year-olds enrolled in primary school. Selected states. 2018 and 2022



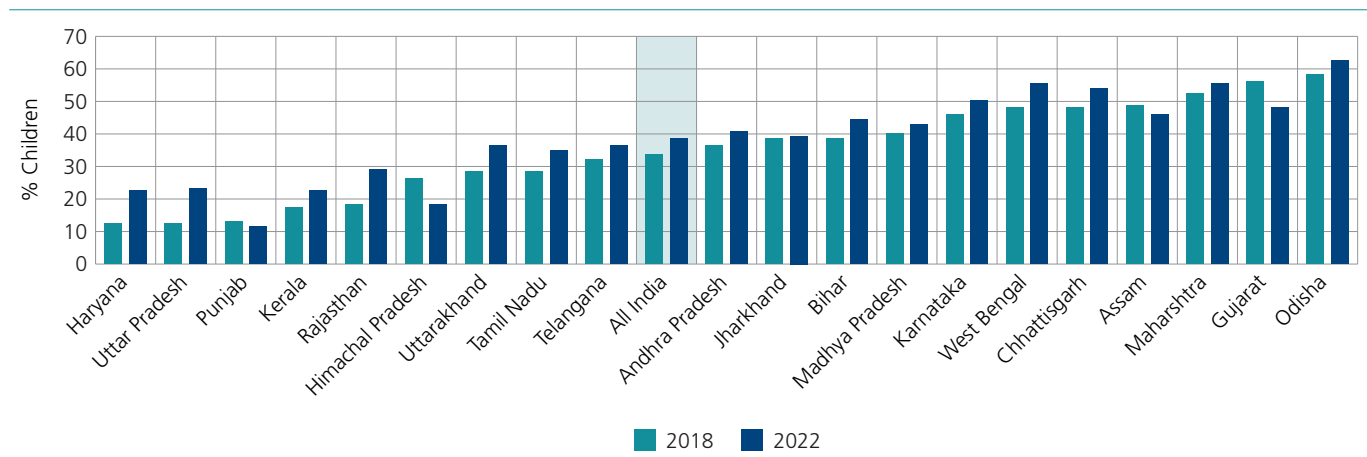
Implications

The shifts in enrollment patterns described above have major implications for the early years ecosystem going forward, especially if NEP goals of both coverage and quality are to be met.

A first, major challenge confronts the ICDS Anganwadi Centres. Data from the Ministry of Women and Child Development shows that the number of centres has grown year on year from 2016-17 to 2021-22, standing at close to 1.4 million centres across the country in June 2022.³ According to these statistics, despite the increasing number of such institutions across the country, the number of 3-6-year-old children enrolled in pre-school education showed a steady decline across the same period. However, since these statistics are not disaggregated by urban/rural location, it is not possible to compare them with enrollment figures from ASER (which reflect only rural populations).

For the 3-6 age group, data from ASER 2018 and 2022 show that enrollments in AWCs across rural India increased by more than 5 percentage points over this 4-year period. This means that in 2022, on average, 4 in every 10 children in the 3-6 age group are enrolled in an AWC (Chart 6). This proportion varies across individual states, but has increased almost everywhere.

Chart 6: Proportion of children age 3-6 enrolled in Anganwadi Centres. Selected states. 2018 and 2022



³Ministry of Women and Child Development, Annual Report 2021-22, p.28. Annexure XV in the same document provides figures for the quarter ending June 2022.

This enormous increase in target population has serious implications for the already overburdened AWC network. With a single Anganwadi worker responsible for delivery of 6 different services to mothers and young children, the delivery of quality pre-school education was a difficult task even prior to 2022 – as has been well documented and discussed elsewhere. The need for facilities of appropriate quality and staff trained to teach young children is recognised in the NEP, but this recent expansion of coverage as well as the shift from private LKG and UKG classes to government AWCs imposes significant additional strain on the system. Ways to leverage additional human, material, and financial resources to support the work of these centres, such as building and supporting networks of local volunteers and mothers' groups, have been implemented in different states. Similar initiatives need to be designed, tested, and scaled up to enable these centres to successfully deliver quality pre-school education.

The other possible pathway to increasing institutional capacity to offer pre-school education is the establishment of pre-primary classes in schools. This year as part of the ASER 2022 school visits,⁴ surveyors asked whether schools had either an Anganwadi Centre or a separate pre-school class. While these findings are not representative of all schools in the country, the data show that among the primary schools (Std I-IV/V) visited, close to half had an Anganwadi on campus (44.3%) but the proportion offering a separate pre-school class was much lower at 28.7%. Among the upper primary schools (Std I-VI/VII/VIII) visited, the proportion offering pre-primary classes was even lower at 22.7%.

Unfortunately since this question was asked for the first time in ASER 2022, there is no baseline for how the availability of these pre-school facilities within school campuses has changed since 2018. But the corresponding enrollment data suggests that the proportion of young children enrolled in government school-based pre-school classes is only a fraction of those going either to AWCs or to private LKG/UKG classes. Further, across all states in the country, this proportion has increased significantly only in Himachal Pradesh (from 3.1% of 3-6 year olds in 2018 to 11.6% in 2022).

The foregoing discussions suggest that while policy goals and parental objectives both strongly support quality education for young children, good intentions urgently need to be supported with adequate resource allocations. While reasonably large proportions of the schools visited in ASER 2022 were providing some form of pre-school class, as reported above, only a fraction of these schools reported having a separate teacher or separate funds for this class. Without the allocation of dedicated human and financial resources, NEP's ambitious goal of achieving universal quality early childhood development, care and education may be difficult to achieve.



⁴As part of the ASER survey, survey teams visit the largest government school with primary sections in each sampled village. ASER 2022 visited a total of more than 17,000 schools across the country.