

Towards Implementation of NEP 2020: Challenges Perceived by Stakeholders in the Context of ECCE

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends a curricular and pedagogical restructuring that emphasises a strong foundation in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to promote the overall learning, development and well-being of children. A strong investment in ECCE enables children to participate and flourish effectively. ECCE emphasises sensory and perceptual development of the child, physical health and motor development, language development, cognitive development, creative and aesthetic appreciation, and personal, social and emotional development. In this context, the present study focuses on the prevailing challenges perceived by the stakeholders (Anganwadi karyakartas, head teachers, Block Education Officers) in attaining ECCE as per NEP 2020. This study is part of the survey conducted by the State Institute of Educational Management and Training (SIEMAT), Prayagraj. A total of 10 blocks were covered, spanning over five selected districts from five zones of the State of Uttar Pradesh. The identified stakeholders were the Anganwadi karyakartas, Block Education Officers, District Project Officers and School Management Committee members.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2011 Census, the number of children in the age group of 0–6 years was approximately 16.45 crores, constituting about 13 per cent of the total population of India. These children are the future

of the country. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which is the foundation for lifelong learning, caters to this group. It enables all children, including the most vulnerable, to start school on an equal footing with their peers, improve overall educational

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achievement and enhance social equity. ECCE encompasses the inseparable elements of care, health, nutrition, play, and early learning within a protective and enabling environment. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (UNESCO, 2021).

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4.2) also targets that by 2030 all girls and boys will have access to quality early childhood development, care and foundational learning, so that they are ready for the preparatory stage of education. The dropout rate increases due to the lack of physical, social and cognitive foundation in the early years. ECCE is an important factor in the strengthening of the foundational and preparatory stages of education. The government has introduced many policies and schemes for strengthening ECCE. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, National Nutrition Policy 1993, National Policy for Children 2013, National ECCE Policy 2013, National Health Mission 2013 and National Health Policy 2017 have recommended various interventions for the health and care of children. In India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development implements various schemes for the welfare, development and protection of children. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme was launched in 1975 for early childhood care and development for all

children in the age group of 0–6 years. Anganwadi centres were started under ICDS. An Anganwadi *karyakarta* provides basic healthcare, nutrition and preschool education in rural areas. Mid-day Meal, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, National Curriculum Framework 2005, and National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework 2013 helped in the promotion of excellence in the field of ECCE.

Recently, the Samagra Shiksha scheme has emphasised a safe and secure infrastructure, including sanitation facilities, developmentally appropriate curriculum, learning activities, pedagogical practices and assessment, professional development of teachers, and community participation and engagement. The scheme emphasises the need to ensure coordination and convergence with the Ministry of Women and Child Development for curriculum development, capacity building of the Anganwadi *karyakarta*, mentoring and support by school teachers and headmasters, and augmenting learning materials (Samagra Shiksha).

NIPUN Bharat has been launched under the aegis of the centrally sponsored scheme of Samagra Shiksha, where the focus is on providing access and retaining children in the foundational years of schooling, teacher capacity building, development of high-quality and diversified student and teacher resources/learning materials, and tracking the progress of each child

in achieving learning outcomes. According to the NIPUN Bharat guidelines, the key components of foundational language and literacy are oral language development, phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency, concepts about print and writing, and culture of reading/ inclination towards reading. The major aspects and components of early mathematics are pre-number concepts, numbers and operations on numbers, measurement, shapes, spatial understanding, and patterns. As envisioned in NEP 2020, before the age of five, every child will move to a 'Preparatory Class' or 'Balvatika' (that is, before Class 1). The learning in such a 'Balvatika' is to be based primarily on play-based learning, with a focus on developing cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities, and early literacy and numeracy. A study conducted by UNESCO (2021) on the right to pre-primary education showed that the adoption of free and compulsory education could affect the quality of education in some countries, due to the level of teacher preparedness and adequate training could be weakened with the sudden expansion of pre-primary education. Addressing the expanding capacity of teacher training institutes and the recruitment of trained pre-primary teaching personnel is therefore essential (UNESCO, 2021). Pattnaik (1996) concluded that the three major challenges for ECCE in India were educating all of the

nation's young children, elevating the professional status of early childhood educators (strengthening early childhood teacher preparation, hiring well-qualified teachers and increasing salaries for early childhood teachers), and preserving the long-revered cultural tradition of community involvement in children's informal learning.

THE VISION OF NEP 2020 FOR ECCE

The National Education Policy 2020, in its curricular and pedagogical restructuring recommendations, emphasises a strong foundation in ECCE to promote overall learning development and well-being. Strong investment in ECCE has the potential to provide all young children with equitable access, enabling them to participate and thrive in the educational system throughout their lives.

According to NEP 2020, universal provision of quality early childhood development, care and education must be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all the students entering Class 1 are school-ready. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022 is also committed to the holistic development and establishing a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged

through major reforms that uphold quality, equity and integrity across the education system, from early childhood care and education to higher education. The expansion of ECCE is proposed through a four-pronged strategy: (a) standalone Anganwadi centres; (b) Anganwadi centres co-located with primary schools; (c) pre-primary sections within primary schools; and (d) standalone pre-schools. Given this context, it is essential to explore the challenges perceived by the stakeholders in the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the challenges faced by the stakeholders for the successful implementation of NEP 2020 with reference to ECCE
2. To gather insights and strategies from the stakeholders for the successful implementation of NEP 2020 in the context of ECCE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population of the study included Anganwadi *karyakartas*, head teachers of primary schools and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of ECCE in Uttar Pradesh. A stratified multi-stage sampling technique was used for the sampling. Firstly, five districts were selected from the five geological/administrative zones of Uttar Pradesh.

The sample districts selected from five zones of Uttar Pradesh were Prayagraj, Balrampur, Jalaun, Shahjahanpur and Etawah. A total of two blocks from each district were selected based on development indicators. An attempt was made to ensure the inclusion of both developed as well as comparatively less developed blocks in the sample. Thus, a total of 10 blocks were covered, spreading over five selected districts from five zones of the State. From each block, five Anganwadi centres and five primary schools were randomly selected. Two Anganwadi *karyakartas* from each selected Anganwadi centre participated in the study, bringing the total number of Anganwadi *karyakartas* to 100. The identified stakeholders were the Block Education Officers, District Project Officers and members of the School Management Committee (SMC). The data were collected by using a questionnaire, semi-structured interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the selected respondents. The field investigators were groomed rigorously for data collection and recording the true responses. The fieldwork was carried out by trained moderators/facilitators to exchange ideas, feelings, and experiences on the challenges and strategies of ECCE. Percentage analysis was used for quantitative data and thematic analysis was used for qualitative data obtained through FGDs.

Table 1
Sample Size at a Glance

District	Block	Cluster	Anganwadi Centres	Anganwadi Karyakatri & Head Teacher
5 Districts	2 blocks from each district $5 \times 2 = 10$	1 cluster from each block $10 \times 1 = 10$ Clusters	5 Anganwadis from each block $(10 \times 5 = 50$ Anganwadi Centres)	2 Anganwadi <i>karyakartas</i> from each block ($2 \times 50 = 100$ Anganwadi <i>karyakartas</i>) 50 Head teachers of primary schools associated with Anganwadi Centres 50 other stakeholders (BEO, SMC members)

CHALLENGES PERCEIVED BY THE STAKEHOLDERS

Infrastructure and Resource-related Challenges

The Anganwadi *karyakartas* responded about challenges related to the availability of pure and clean water, quality nutrition for children, and a lack of adequate cleaning supplies in the Balvatikas. They expressed concerns about inadequate honorarium and insufficient funds for conducting activities in Balvatika. Only 33 per cent of participants reported that electricity was unavailable, whereas more than 50 per cent of the stakeholders believed that Anganwadi centres lacked ventilated rooms, toilets and adequate space for organising sports activities. Major challenges that emerged through FGDs were lack of proper infrastructure facilities, lack of electricity, lack of space for activities, lack of furniture and equipment and lack of ICT facilities at Balvatikas. Ramps and railings for the protection of young children are

also lacking. Another critical issue was the remote location of Balvatikas, which made it difficult for the parents to drop off their children. In some cases, the floods further obstructed access to the centres. Furthermore, not all Anganwadi centres had sufficient *karyakartas*, and the shortage of maids, kitchen staff and cleaning personnel emerged as a major challenge.

Pedagogy-related Challenges

The Anganwadi *karyakartas* reported a few challenges related to pedagogy, such as portfolio preparation, group work, collaborative work, evaluation by observation of activities, finding localised and familiar examples, and creating new inspirational essays/posters/stories to teach literacy/numerical skills to the children. They also felt that ensuring the participation of all children in every game was itself a challenging task. Other pedagogy-related challenges included the preparation of records of Balvatika activities, determining

which socio-emotional skills are to be developed in children, and selecting appropriate teaching methods to achieve certain learning outcomes. Additionally, conducting remedial *mohalla* (community) classes to bridge learning gaps and acquire engaging teaching-learning materials, such as posters, toys and objects proved to be difficult.

A significant number of Anganwadi *karyakartas*, i.e., 90 percent, acknowledged that preparing cost-effective learning materials was a major challenge. Providing bilingual education to students further emerged as a concern. The Anganwadi *karyakartas* observed that alphabet recognition, number recognition and phonological pronunciation needed more emphasis than comparison and pattern recognition.

Major challenges perceived by the Anganwadi *karyakartas* included extremely low attendance of the children. Further, the pressure on officials to participate in political rallies and the delay in payment of honorarium posed another hindrance for the *karyakartas*. The lack of proper supervision and adequate help from the authorities in resolving problems related to the ECCE centres added to their burden.

Challenges Related to Personal Factors

More than 75 per cent of the Anganwadi *karyakartas* felt mental and physical fatigue. Sixty per cent of the *karyakartas*

expressed difficulty in managing their family responsibilities and routine work-related difficulties, and 53 per cent also faced strained family relationships while working at ECCE centres.

Challenges Perceived by Head Teachers and Other Stakeholders

Seventy per cent of the stakeholders found it challenging to ensure the involvement of parents to increase children's participation in learning. The availability of pure and clean water, and sufficient funds for other activities of the Balvatika Kendra was another problem that cropped up. The stakeholders acknowledged the issues in getting adequate help to resolve the problems related to the ECCE centre. Individual differences among children when being taught was another unique challenge. Only 23 per cent of the stakeholders and Head teachers thought that there was pressure on officials to participate in political rallies, and 45 per cent thought that there was a lack of proper supervision by the concerned authorities. More than 40 per cent of the stakeholders observed mental and physical fatigue, whereas only 26 per cent felt strained family relationships, while 28 per cent of them felt difficulty in attending family functions, and 35 per cent felt difficulty in having a daily routine.

Economic and Professional Challenges

The honorarium received by the Anganwadi *karyakartas* was found to

be inadequate. Also, it was not received on the due date and the *karyakartas* faced economic problems. Lack of professional pedagogical skills among *karyakartas* was another difficulty. Yet, another concern was too much burden on the *karyakartas*—they were assigned many other duties by the administration during the summer holidays. A gap between the treatment of primary school teachers and Anganwadi *karyakartas* was observed, which requires remedial measures.

Community-related Challenges

Parental negligence towards sending children to the Anganwadi centre is a major reason for low attendance. Lack of support from community members towards Anganwadi centres emerged as another challenge. Furthermore, a few Anganwadi centres have been encroached by the village community, leading to a crunch of space for official operations. Therefore, a lack of cooperation by the village community emerged as a major concern.

STRATEGIES SUGGESTED BY THE STAKEHOLDERS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF ECCE

The Anganwadi *karyakartas* and the stakeholders suggested strategies related to infrastructure, administration, professional competency, development and pedagogy.

Infrastructure-related Strategies for Balvatika

ECCE centres were found to be lacking proper infrastructural facilities,

clean spaces for conducting classes using the play-based method, clean surroundings for the preparation of hygienic and healthy food, and proper space for sports and other learning activities. The stakeholders were not in favour of packaged food for children, but the Anganwadi *karyakartas* fully agreed on the supply of packaged food to the children.

Administrative Strategies for Balvatika

All the stakeholders and Anganwadi *karyakartas* were of the opinion that funds should be provided to the *karyakartas* for various activities at the Balvatika. The Balvatika *karyakartas* requested to be recognised as government employees. They also emphasised the need for opportunities to share their experiences and ideas to improve the Balvatika operations. Furthermore, they urged the concerned authorities to ensure the timely monitoring of Balvatika activities.

Professional Competency Development Strategies

Programmes for competency building proved to be a major requirement for the Anganwadi *karyakartas*. There was a strong demand for professional development programmes to enhance their skills. A request was made for the training of the Anganwadi *karyakartas* to promote the adoption of innovative techniques during the teaching-learning process. Training in painting, clay making, toy making, and drawing was found to have helped

them develop better skills, which further helped them in developing self-prepared teaching aids. Creating supporting teaching-learning material such as handouts/worksheets also requires certain training.

It was also noted that demand based in-service programmes for *karyakartas* were needed, focusing on learning outcomes, as per their need to manage small children.

Pedagogy-related Strategies

While dealing with the educational and emotional needs of children, pedagogical considerations are very crucial. The stakeholders showed awareness about the need for teaching at Balvatikas to be in the mother tongue at all levels, and the supporting teaching-learning material to also be in the mother tongue or the language that children preferred at home. They wanted a fixed target for the minimum level of learning for each age group. They were also aware that planning group work and encouraging children to work together was a crucial requirement for the target age group.

CONCLUSION

Thus, addressing the training needs of the Anganwadi *karyakartas*

is essential. Skill development workshops like painting, clay making, toy making and drawing should be organised from time to time to help them create appropriate teaching aids for the children of Balvatika. Additionally, the production of training modules and instructional videos can further support the Anganwadi *karyakartas*.

It is crucial to train *karyakartas* in innovative, age-specific pedagogical skills, with a focus on learning outcome-based programmes. They should be trained to create supporting teaching-learning material, such as handouts/worksheets and reading resources for the children. The use of the local language should be a prime focus, while fulfilling the training needs of the *karyakartas*.

Implementing these measures will contribute to early childcare and education, aligning with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022 outlines key pedagogical strategies that need to be effectively disseminated at the grassroot level to strengthen the foundational stage of education for young children.

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