

Co-location of Anganwadis to Primary Schools in India: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Numerous researches conducted in various countries using a wide range of methodologies indicate that the successful completion of pre-primary education is associated with school readiness and improved performance outcomes. Recognising this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has recommended a new education structure, 5+3+3+4, to provide seamless transitions for children. In the current scenario, four models of pre-primary institutions delivering early childhood education are functional: (a) stand-alone Anganwadis, (b) Anganwadis co-located with primary schools, (c) pre-primary schools/sections covering at least ages 5–6 years co-located with existing primary schools, and (d) stand-alone pre-schools (private or run by civil society organisations). Locating Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) on the premises of primary schools is intended to ensure universal enrollment, child preparedness for school, and a smooth transition to Grade 1 in primary school. This paper will focus on the concept of co-location, the steps taken by different states in India to implement the model, and its impact on the learning and pedagogical process during the early years. The paper will further discuss the advantages of co-locating pre-primary setups in primary schools and the challenges faced in this process. Finally, it will offer recommendations to facilitate the co-location process effectively. Understanding co-location involves examining how pre-primary institutions share resources and spaces with primary schools. This integration aims to enhance the educational experience for young children, making it easier for them to transition to formal schooling. Different states have adopted various approaches to implement this model, with some showing significant progress. The advantages of co-locating pre-primary setups in primary schools include better resource utilisation, increased enrollment rates, improved teacher collaboration, and a more cohesive educational experience for children. However, challenges such as infrastructural limitations, teacher training, and administrative coordination need to be addressed to maximise the benefits of this model.

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Recommendations to facilitate the process of co-location include investing in infrastructure, providing specialised training for teachers, fostering collaboration between pre-primary and primary educators, and ensuring consistent policy implementation across states. By addressing these challenges and leveraging the advantages of co-location, the educational system can better support early childhood development and create a stronger foundation for lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

Formative years of a child's life (from birth to eight years) lay the foundation for future learning and development. The early childhood years are critical for the development of language skills; social, cognitive, and emotional capabilities, and for school preparedness. This can be achieved by investing in quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) and ensuring a seamless transition of young children from Anganwadi (pre-primary) to formal schooling.

This paper focuses on children aged 3–8 years, the period when they enter pre-primary programmes. In 2018–2019, the Ministry of Education (MoE) envisaged a continuum of school education, starting from pre-primary education to senior secondary levels under Samagra Shiksha. In 2020, the National Education Policy (NEP) reconfigured the existing structure to a four-staged pedagogical structure (5+3+3+4). The much-awaited integration of three years of Pre-primary/Anganwadi/Balvatika for children between 3–6 years with the early years (Grades 1 and 2) of primary schooling is aimed at achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy. The government proposes

to strengthen universal access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programmes with a focus on disadvantaged areas across the country, in a phased manner. The four existing pre-primary education models of institutions delivering ECE are as follows:

1. Anganwadi Centres Co-located with Primary Schools: To facilitate functional convergence, Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) are encouraged to co-locate within the premises of primary schools, preferably at a distance of 500 metres from a government school. Close to 30 per cent of AWCs are co-located with government schools (Task Force ECCE, MWCD, 2022). With the NEP 2020 in place, there is an urgency to revisit the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, reduce existing gaps and challenges, and strengthen development during the foundational years.

2. Pre-primary Schools/Sections Covering at Least Age 5–6 Years Co-located with Existing Primary Schools: In many states, government and municipal corporation schools have pre-primary classes located on their premises. This co-location helps in providing a continuous educational experience from pre-primary to primary education.

3. Stand-alone Preschools (Private or Run by Civil Society Organisations):

Preschools or ECE centres run and maintained by private stakeholders or non-government organisations are in demand, especially in metropolitan cities. However, the mushrooming of these preschools has resulted in the ‘McDonaldisation of preschools’, where the absence of regulatory frameworks leads to a focus on rote learning and academics, rather than on pedagogical practices for ECE.

4. Stand-alone AWCs: These are independently functioning Anganwadis, mentored and supervised by the flagship ICDS programme, aimed at providing ECCE services for children aged 3–6 years. They have their own buildings or operate in rented spaces, with a requirement of at least 600 sq. ft. as per the guidelines of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD). Strengthening the ICDS programme is essential to achieve universalisation of high-quality ECCE.

Current Status of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in India

In India, AWCs are an integral part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme, run by MWCD. As of March 2022, 13.99 lakh AWCs are operational across the country, providing early childhood care and education (Task Force ECCE, MWCD, 2022). In 2018–2019, approximately 43.5 per cent of AWCs were functioning in government buildings, 26.6 per cent in rented spaces, 17.8 per cent in

schools, 6.8 per cent in community areas and 5.3 per cent in Gram Panchayats. Over 60 per cent of AWCs in Uttar Pradesh are located in school premises, and nearly 25–30 per cent are operating from schools in Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Uttarakhand (Institute of Economic Growth, 2020).

AWCs serve approximately 30 million children aged 3–6 years across the country. Nearly 70 per cent of the children in India benefit from the services of AWCs, including early childhood care, education, nutrition, and health. However, they face challenges, such as low attendance rates and limited focus on learning and promoting activities (Rao & Kaul, 2018; Dhingra and Sharma, 2011; Manhas & Qadiri, 2010; NIPCCD, 2006). Other areas requiring attention include safe and spacious classrooms, toilets, and learning materials (Niti Aayog, 2020; Dhingra & Sharma, 2011; NIPCCD, 2006). The physical separation of AWCs and primary schools hinders smooth transitions and universal enrollment. Consequently, the Ministry of Education (MoE) is making efforts to ensure convergence between pre-primary and primary programmes, ensuring effective transitions.

CO-LOCATION AND TRANSITIONS FROM PRE-PRIMARY TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

Transitions are inevitable changes experienced by children in the process of learning and development. Pre-primary

education builds a strong skill foundation for formal learning in early primary schooling, improves learning outcomes, narrows achievement gaps, reduces the need for remedial education, and can boost childrens' learning in later life (UNICEF, 2019; Department of Education & Training, 2015; OECD, 2006). Transitions are facilitated if young children attending Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) transition to Grade 1 in the same location, as they are familiar with the space (CECDR & Save the Children, 2019). To make children feel safe and secure during transitions and to sustain gains, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced on 20 July 2017, that both ministries and their departments would work together and converge their activities. Government policy mandates AWCs to be co-located in government schools as far as possible. These systemic efforts aim to provide an enabling environment for quality early childhood education (ECE) through appropriate curricula and teaching-learning materials, ensuring the use of appropriate pedagogies and strengthening links with primary education (UNICEF, 2020). The curriculum guidelines for pre-primary schools, prepared by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, also align with this philosophy (NCERT, 2019).

Initiatives Supporting Co-located AWCs

1. ***Kilkari Project in Chandigarh (2021–2022):*** This project focuses on strengthening classrooms with Teaching– Learning Materials (TLM) and creating Activity Corners (Story Corner, Art and Writing Corner, Music Corner) and play areas. Training was organised for pre-primary teachers to orient them with the provisions of NEP 2020 and strengthen their skills in creating low-cost TLM and child-friendly learning spaces.
2. ***Balvatikas in Uttar Pradesh:*** Developed by the Department of Basic Education, these activity rooms in primary schools facilitate play-based activities and school readiness programmes for children aged 4–5 years. The Vidya Pravesh programme prepares children for transition to Grade 1 by engaging them in activities to promote school readiness for two hours every day (Nangia et. al., 2022).
3. ***Chahak in Bihar:*** A three month module to make children school-ready through a play-based pedagogy, consisting of approximately 140 activities based on language, numeracy, environment,

physical, and social-emotional development. The aim is to provide psychological support to children from marginalised communities and help them feel comfortable in a school environment.

4. ***Ka-sreni in Assam:*** Introduced in 1999 and supported by the RTE Act 2009, this initiative provides foundational literacy and numeracy skills through a holistic learning environment with support from ICDS and the social welfare department. Thematic activity books, free colouring and drawing books, and English textbooks are provided to Ka-sreni learners (MoE, 2017).

Samagra Shiksha and NIPUN Bharat

Samagra Shiksha recognises the pre-primary programme as a critical component for achieving equal opportunities for schooling and equitable learning outcomes. The National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat programme emphasises foundational learning of early literacy, numeracy, and language in Grades 1–3. It includes the innovative concept of Vidya Pravesh, recommended by NEP 2020, to ease the transition of children from a

pre-primary environment to primary school.

Infrastructure and Other Facilities

Co-locating AWCs in schools ensures young children have access to spacious classrooms, drinking water, and safe toilets (Niti Aayog, 2020). Spare rooms in schools could be allocated for AWCs, or adjustments can be made in the timings of AWCs and schools. For example, in Kendrapara, Odisha, AWCs run in schools during the early morning hours before school children arrive (CECDR & Save the Children, 2019).

Enrolment and Attendance

Co-locating pre-primary programmes in schools promotes participation rates due to the availability of adequate physical infrastructure (Department of Education & Training, 2015). A formal setup with better infrastructure serves as an incentive for parents to enrol their children in AWCs. In Rajasthan, efforts are made to ensure co-location in a phased manner, ensuring adequate physical infrastructure like classrooms, toilets, and libraries (*Times of India*, 2021; CECDR & Save the Children, 2019).

Training to Ensure Implementation of Appropriate Pedagogical Processes

To foster holistic learning and development with a focus on

curiosity and creativity among pre-primary children, the National ECCE Curriculum Framework (2013) promotes a play-based, experiential, and child-friendly approach for early education. Continuous efforts towards training Anganwadi workers (AWWs), supervisors, teachers, and Headmasters through joint workshops are essential. The NEP 2020 recommends ensuring proper brain development and desired learning curves through excellent care, nurture, nutrition, physical activity, psycho-social environment, emotional and cognitive stimulation during a child's first six years.

Improving Quality in Delivery through Professional Exchange

Co-locating AWCs in schools facilitates coordination, monitoring, and mentoring of programmes. AWWs are supported by school teachers, who may be designated as their mentors as envisaged by MWCD and MoE. Training workshops and academic exchanges in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh have benefitted both school teachers and AWWs (Sain & Ghosh, 2022). Co-location ensures proper coordination and convergence of MWCD and Samagra Shiksha in curriculum development, capacity building of AWWs, professional development of teachers, and mentoring and support from school teachers and Principals. School teachers can mentor AWWs in preparing learning activities, following

play-based pedagogy, and creating culturally contextual play materials (Nangia et. al., 2022).

Increase in Family Engagement

Co-location of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in primary schools supports parental engagement by providing 'warm referrals' or 'soft entry points', making transitions easier for parents and reducing their inhibitions (Jose et al., 2021; Department of Education & Training, 2015). This increased familiarity with the space can enhance parent participation and strengthen parent-school collaborations. Additionally, siblings can accompany older siblings to Anganwadis, benefitting from the convenience of co-location (WB & BCG, 2014; CECDR & Save the Children, 2019).

Co-location and Its Challenges

While co-location offers numerous advantages, several challenges need to be addressed for successful implementation.

1. Barriers in Accessing Primary Schools:

- *Accessibility and Safety:* Schools not located within the community can hinder access to AWCs. The state education department of Rajasthan has established that AWCs can be co-located with schools located within 500 metres or less from their premises (CECDR & Save the Children, 2019; *Times of*

India, 2017). Ensuring that AWCs are accessible and safe is crucial in planning co-location.

2. Forced Downward Extension of Primary Curriculum:

- *Preserving the Identity of AWCs:* AWCs have traditionally maintained a unique pedagogical approach. Co-location might lead to the imposition of primary school curricula, potentially compromising the play-based, child-centred learning environment of AWCs. To prevent this, it is essential to ensure that AWCs are well-informed and trained on early years pedagogy. Proper monitoring is needed to avoid rote learning and ensure that children benefit from a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

3. Managing Heterogeneous Groups of Children:

- *Preventing Disruptions and Bullying:* Co-locating different age groups can lead to issues, such as bullying of younger children by older ones and noise disturbances. Managing time schedules and planning activities to minimise disruptions between groups is important for maintaining a positive learning environment.

4. Hindrance to Effective Implementation of ICDS Services:

- *Comfort of Beneficiaries:* Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) cater to a diverse group, including pregnant and lactating mothers. These beneficiaries may not feel comfortable accessing services like Take Home Ration (THR) or immunisation in a school setting. Addressing these concerns is important to ensure that all Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) are effectively delivered.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The government's promotion of co-location aims to integrate children aged 3–6 years into the education system effectively. To enhance the success of co-location, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening AWCs:

- *Training and Resources:* Ensure that AWCs are well-trained to provide stimulating, play-based education. Opportunities for guided and free play should be provided to support holistic development across cognitive, physical, language, and socio-emotional domains (OECD, 2017; World Bank & Boston Consulting Group, 2014).

2. Facilitating Positive Engagement:

- *Teacher-AWW Collaboration:* Foster positive interactions between school teachers and AWWs. Teachers with expertise in early childhood care and education (ECCE) can serve as effective mentors for AWWs.

3. Issuing Joint Guidelines:

- *Roles and Responsibilities:* The Ministry of Education and MWCD should issue joint guidelines outlining roles, responsibilities, and monitoring processes for co-located AWCs. Age-appropriate admission guidelines should also be established to ensure children enter schools at suitable ages and follow appropriate educational trajectories.

4. Utilising Existing Infrastructure:

- *Repurposing School Buildings:* Utilise buildings of closed primary schools for AWCs, provided they have adequate facilities like drinking water, toilets, and playgrounds. Ensure that AWCs are not located in open spaces to maintain a conducive learning environment.

5. Research and Data Collection:

- *Expanding Knowledge Base:* Conduct research, mapping, and exploratory studies to gather reliable data on co-location. This will support effective planning and decision-making.

By addressing these challenges and implementing the recommendations, the process of co-locating AWCs in primary schools can be optimised to improve early childhood education and ensure a smooth transition for young learners.

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