

Rejuvenate Anganwadi for children to start school early

There are nutritional, learning and social mobility advantages to children starting school at an early age

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The New Education Policy (NEP) has many angles that are being heatedly discussed. The introduction of regional language in schools, allowing foreign universities to open campuses in the country and many other topics have been highly contested. However, there is one initiative that may be a silver lining.

One of the proposals of the NEP is to restructure schooling into a 5+3+3+4 model. This implies starting formal or structured schooling early, at three years rather than at 5-6 years, which is the normal in India currently. The average starting age for children across the world is a little over six years and it varies between five to seven years.

What is the correct age for children to start school? Currently, there is a larger policy debate surrounding this but it is centered in the developed world. Europe, North America and Oceania have arguments and trends going in both directions. Australia and New Zealand are debating the idea of starting formal education at the age of four, whereas England is trying to delay the start of formal education. Finland, said to have one of the best educational models in the world, starts formal schooling at age seven for its children.

The evidence in favour of a late start suggests that children learn many lessons at home from engaging with parents and other caregivers. The cognitive development and imagination of the child is not bound by constraints of the curriculum. David Whitebread at Cambridge University shows that constructive play builds intellectual and emotional skills that are crucial in early learning and development of the child.

On the other hand, the arguments in favour of starting school early include that children who start early will also complete school early and so will have more earning years. Further, in a recent study, Cornelissen and Dustmann have shown that children who start early have better language and math skills, more so for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

In this context, what works best for a developing country? Are the challenges faced here different from those in the developed world? The difficulties faced in developed countries about formalized curriculum needs to be weighed with the developing country challenges, including not having parents who have formal education, low nutritional outcomes and no access to day care.

For India, first, we have a population where adult literacy and formal education is low, with more than 50% of the parents themselves not having gone to school. Second, the nutritional outcomes for children in India are adverse, with child stunting (a long-term measure of malnourishment that shows the age-appropriate height) rate of 37.9%. Finally, most of the Indian workforce is en-

gaged in informal labour or in agriculture, with no access to day care. So, if the parents are working, the children are either seen sitting around in hazardous conditions in the parents' workplace or the older girl child is held back from school to take care of the younger ones. These pose hurdles to cognitive development of children as proposed by intellectuals arguing for a late start.

Additionally, starting school early may be one way of increasing inter-generational mobility, by ensuring that all children learn at school and so the parent's socio-economic background does not affect the outcomes of their children. Such a policy has the potential to reduce inherent inequalities based on caste and other social markers that have plagued growth in India.

On the second issue of nutrition, for most of India that still resides in rural parts of the country, the Anganwadi has been the main location where a child's health is monitored and improved. The Anganwadi system in India was started in 1975 under the Integrated Child Development Services programme to fight child hunger and malnutrition. Since then, the responsibilities of the Anganwadi have increased manifold. The Anganwadi worker has been solely responsible for monitoring pre-natal and post-natal care, tracking the immunisation programme and providing nutritional supplements.

For rural India, low income areas and urban slums, the Anganwadi is the only functional day care centre when all adults in the household are in the fields or at work. In this current set-up, the Anganwadi then is also the place where the children are picking up their early cognitive skills.

In recent times, Anganwadi workers have protested due to the overburdening of the system as the one-stop shop for nutrition and welfare of women and children in India. The NEP initiative may further burden this overstretched system. However, if the government is serious about early start, implementation has to be seriously looked into. First, they will have to allocate a substantial budget to the Anganwadis. Second, they will have to focus on upskilling existing workers and hiring and training many more new workers. The demand on existing infrastructure will also increase extensively. If executed efficiently, the new policy of starting school early may also result in the formalisation of the crucial institution of the Anganwadis.

So, there may be multiple advantages to an early start. But all this will depend on how much support is provided to the Anganwadis and how it links to other policies like universal access to education.

We can also compare this initiative with an earlier policy of the Government of India. The mid-day meal, a nutritional policy, is one of the most successful tools used by the government to increase enrolment into primary schools. Our experience tells us that nutrition and enrolment are linked in India. The NEP's early start may be able to achieve the opposite, an enrolment programme that will improve the nourishment and development of children in India.

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