

Early Childhood and the Transition to Primary School: Choices and Inequalities in Andhra Pradesh



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Awareness of the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children below the age of 8 has increased in recent years. It is seen as the foundation of primary education and as a crucial step towards attaining the five MDGs which concern the health, nutrition and education of young children. A key challenge now is how to make high-quality ECCE universal so that it reaches the children who need it most. Young Lives research tracking individual children in India, Ethiopia and Peru offers important evidence about the changing nature of ECCE provision and patterns of inequality in young children's access to care and education. This Policy Brief presents findings from Andhra Pradesh in India and concludes that more efficient resourcing and effective regulation are needed to strengthen existing services, both public and private, if long-term outcomes for children are to be improved. But equally important is the need for a holistic and comprehensive policy for ECCE and the early years of every young child.

Strengthening early childhood care and education (ECCE) and primary education has long been a policy priority in India. With an estimated 70 million children aged between 3 and 6 years old this presents a huge challenge for policymakers. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme is one of the earliest examples of state provision of integrated ECCE to children under the age of 6. This innovative programme provided a combination of nutritional services, immunisation and health check-ups, along with some non-formal pre-school education for 34 million Indian children in 2009.

ICDS has encountered a range of difficulties, notably variable quality, low resources and weak coordination among the various ministries and departments responsible for the education and well-being of young children. These difficulties, combined with economic change, have resulted in parents turning to the private sector for provision of pre-school education, which coincides with a massive growth of the private sector across all levels of education.

These difficulties have led to a complex pattern of ECCE provision during the last decade. On the one hand, the relatively under-resourced ICDS continues to meet basic health and nutrition goals. It co-exists, and increasingly competes, with a diverse and relatively unregulated private sector, which initiates children into formal learning from a very early age. Thus there is an increased diversity of opportunities available to individual children, with inequalities of access reinforcing disadvantages linked to children's household circumstances.

This Policy Brief examines experiences of ECCE and the transition to primary school for a sample of nearly 2,000 children who were born in 2001 and live in 20 sites across the state of Andhra Pradesh. Survey data show positive superficial evidence that access to some kind of ECCE is not only high, but also largely equitable. But within this initially positive picture, there are major differences between children's experiences of ECCE depending on whether and when they attend government or private pre-school. A child's individual pathway through the early years depends on urban/rural location, family circumstances, and parents' priorities for educating their children.

There are numerous policy challenges for early education and the transition to primary school in Andhra Pradesh, notably those stemming from a weakly governed pre-school sector and a primary sector that risks amplifying educational inequalities. These challenges, and the strategies needed to resolve them, offer lessons for strengthening and universalising the provision of high-quality ECCE in India and beyond.

Increasing choice or increasing inequality?

- 87% of Young Lives children attended pre-school at some point since their third birthday. The chances of attending pre-school were similar for urban and rural children and for boys and girls. However, at the age of 5 more children in urban areas were still in pre-school (often kindergarten classes of private schools), while children in rural areas were often enrolled early in primary school classes.
- Parents are ambitious and creative in their efforts to secure their children's early education, even under difficult circumstances, where household poverty makes fee-paying very challenging.
- Household poverty level, urban/rural location and mother's educational attainment are strongly predictive of attendance at either government or private pre-school.
- There is an urgent need for rejuvenating and strengthening government pre- and primary schools, and for improving regulation of the private sector.

Changing patterns of early childhood and primary school provision

In the last decade, levels of enrolment in primary school across India have increased steadily, although regional imbalances and social inequalities remain. Recent government legislation (the 2010 Right to Education Act) entitles all children to free elementary schooling, but does not extend this right to children below the age of 6. While many younger children attend government primary and pre-schools, there has also been a rapid growth in private primary schools, which often provide kindergarten classes for pre-school children.

Government ECCE services are based on over a million *anganwadis*, which are still the most used type of pre-school for children in rural areas. *Anganwadis* are usually staffed by women with low levels of formal training. While the stated goals for ICDS are comprehensive, in practice most *anganwadis* focus more on health and nutrition than education or child development. Nonetheless, research has shown that attending an *anganwadi* can have a positive impact on retention in primary school, especially for girls, and many rural parents see them as a place that prepares children for school.

It is impossible to estimate the real size of the private sector as many schools with kindergarten classes are unregistered and unregulated. They range from a few expensive and prestigious schools to those which are relatively cheap, over-crowded and under-equipped. The quality of the education they provide is similarly variable, and pre-school teachers often lack ECCE training. Many private primary schools offer tuition through the medium of English, even in kindergarten, and this is one of the major factors which attract parents to them.

In Andhra Pradesh, government pre-school and primary provision continues to dominate in rural areas, especially for the poorest households, while the private sector is more significant in urban communities. However, the situation is changing fast. While children attending private schools traditionally come from better-off urban households, increasing numbers of poor households in towns and villages are making significant sacrifices to send children to private school, often resulting in large debts. In some cases, this also involves sending quite young children away from home to live with relatives or stay in a boarding hostel linked to the school of choice.

These trends are illustrated in Table 1 which summarises primary school attendance by rural and urban children in Andhra Pradesh at age 8. Contrasting data from the younger sample of children born in 2000–01 with those

from an older cohort born in 1994–95 shows clearly both the overall growth of private schooling, and the increasing likelihood of rural children attending a private school.

Table 1. Trends in primary school attendance at age 8, rural and urban Andhra Pradesh

Percentage attending	Across whole sample	Rural	Urban
Older cohort (in 2001, age 8) n=796			
Government school	74	87	33
Private school	24	10	64
Younger cohort (in 2009, age 8) n=1920			
Government school	55	67	18
Private school	44	32	79

Overall, poverty levels and urban versus rural location are major factors shaping educational opportunities during the early grades of primary school. The trends for 8-year-olds in Table 1 reinforce children's use of ECCE during their early years, when government *anganwadis* were the most popular choice for children in rural communities, especially those from the poorest households, while private pre-school was the most popular choice for families in urban areas. In both urban and rural areas, household poverty levels were strongly linked to whether children attended a government or private pre-school. 88% of urban children in the least-poor quintile of the sample attended private pre-schools, in contrast with 34% of the poorest quintile. It is striking that levels of access to private pre-schools amongst these poorest urban families is still higher than amongst any wealth quintile in rural areas, with only 31% of the better-off rural families sending their child to a private pre-school.

Pathways through ECCE

The diversity of educational provision on offer in early childhood means that there is no common school system in India. Instead, individual children attend private or government schools on the basis of their parents'

- location and social position
- ability to pay
- perception of what constitutes a 'good' education
- different aspirations for boys and girls in their families.

The consequence for children is that their transition to schooling can involve negotiating a series of pathways, with various key choice points encountered by families along the way. Young Lives findings suggest that there are three main pathways through early education, each associated with different challenges and opportunities.

Table 2. Pathways through early education, Andhra Pradesh

		Percentage of total sample (n=1646)		
		Girls	Boys	Total
1	Government pre-school to government primary school	64	53	58
2	Private kindergarten to private primary school	35	46	41
3	Government pre-school to private primary school	1	2	1

The majority of children from poor rural families take the first pathway. The transition between *anganwadi* and primary school is often challenging. Most *anganwadis* lack a focus on education, whereas in primary schools children encounter longer hours, strict teaching and the threat of punishment. Nonetheless, a surprisingly high number of children are sent to primary school with their older siblings even before they are old enough to be formally registered, partly to acclimatise them to this new environment.

Children on the second pathway most commonly come from relatively better-off households, although there are exceptions as the statistics reported earlier make clear, where even the very poorest make sacrifices to send at least one of their children to private school. Parents perceive private education to be of a higher quality, the most visible marker being English-medium teaching, although parents also value the intensive scheduling of classes and the capacity of private schools to ensure the attendance of both teachers and pupils.

Children on the less common third pathway are sent to *anganwadis* to familiarise themselves with school before being enrolled in private primary schools. Their main challenge on arriving in primary school is the change in language medium requiring children to repeat the kindergarten years irrespective of age. Children on this pathway are most likely to experience multiple transitions between schools, in some cases having to move to cheaper private schools or back to government schools. This presents considerable problems with continuity.

Choices and challenges in children's transition to school

While parents have found a range of different ways of finding the best for their children, there are many choices and challenges which are common across all three early education pathways.

The distribution of resources between boys and girls is one of the main determinants of parental choice. As Table 2 highlights, gender differences in early education have become stronger as private education has become more

widespread. By the age of 8, these differences are firmly established in rural areas where 39% of boys were in private school compared with only 23% of girls. Relatively poor families are prepared to spend more on educating their sons than their daughters, arguing that spending on boys is an investment because they stay in the family once they grow up and marry, whereas girls traditionally move to their husband's family, and there are dowry costs to consider.

Parents frequently value some stages of education above others. Some value the first years of education more, and thus invest in private education at this stage, while others will save money for the later stages. These choices are often partly influenced by the fact that tuition fees in private schools increase grade by grade, and can result in children having a fragmented experience of school with problems of continuity.

One of the most distinctive features of children's early education experiences in Andhra Pradesh is the growing tendency for children to be placed in boarding hostels or with relatives who live close to a chosen private school. Parents are often either discouraged from or are not able to visit their children. As well as adjusting to a new school and a demanding curriculum in a different language, such children also have to learn very quickly to look after themselves. Some children adjust well and like the quality of care and education that they are provided with, but others become isolated and disconnected from their families and communities.

Conversations with children and their carers clearly show that having access to school is not enough to achieve success in education. Children's circumstances at home and their expected roles and responsibilities also determine their ability to take advantage of educational opportunities. Balancing school with other responsibilities is particularly difficult for children at government schools. They are more likely to have to care for younger siblings, and to work with their parents.

Even though the majority of parents have high expectations of their children's education, most reported having difficulties in helping them with their schoolwork. In this respect, children in boarding hostels may be in a stronger position to take advantage of their education. Some, however, are overwhelmed by the pressure of intensive activities. One child reported going for an hour of tuition at 6am, attending school until 4.30pm, and having another tuition session until 8pm, a regime which she described as "too tiring".

Policy implications

The fact that it is poor rural children who are likely to have unsettling transitions to primary school does not seem to bode well for encouraging future positive progress into school. While good-quality services remain inaccessible to the most disadvantaged children, there is a high risk that inequalities will continue further along children's educational trajectories.

In view of the complex, diverse and potentially divisive experiences of children and their families we observe, policies and programmes should be revisited and investment in early childhood education enhanced to make them more equitable, as well as to reach the most disadvantaged children. This includes rejuvenating ICDS *anganwadis*, strengthening the quality of government schools, improving regulation of private primary schools, and developing a more integrated approach to ECCE and primary education as a sector serving children aged 0–8 years.

Anganwadis have historically played a major role in supporting the health and development of millions of children through the ICDS programme, which still serves a valuable function in offering nutritional supplements for the poorest families. However, our research suggests that for most parents priorities have shifted, and the traditional functions of *anganwadis* are no longer seen as sufficient. In a competitive economic climate, and a fast-growing economy, parents see the failure to prepare children for school learning as a significant shortcoming. Nonetheless, because *anganwadis* are already reaching the most remote

and impoverished areas of the country, they contain the potential to support the poorest children in their transitions to and through formal education. The programme should continue providing nutritional and health benefits, but also an improved and more solid early education programme.

While private education is becoming important for families in India as a way of giving their children better opportunities, the current approach will not achieve equitable goals. Specific government interventions are required to provide children and their families with the equal opportunity to receive a good education, beginning with effective registration, licensing and monitoring of all private providers, in tandem with improving quality throughout the government sector.

ECCE needs to be acknowledged as a fundamental right, alongside basic education for children over the age of 6. Currently the Right to Education Act does not include ECCE. A more integrated approach to the full age range is required, extending into and working closely with the primary sector in ways that ensure continuity in the curriculum, learning strategies and quality of school environment. ECCE demands multiple actions towards children in relation to their nutrition, health and educational welfare, and for this reason requires the involvement of multiple sectors, programmes and actors. This calls for the development of an ECCE policy framework that ensures continuity across different government bodies that provide services to young children, and that is capable of capturing the complexities of these early years. ECCE should be recognised as a solid foundation for children's future education, and thus as a worthwhile investment for public spending.

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