

Teacher Readiness in India's Early Childhood Care and Education vis-à-vis SDG 4.2

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Abstract

This article critically examines the readiness of ECCE teachers and anganwadi workers in India vis-a-vis the global benchmarks articulated under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2. The article draws upon the frameworks and the normative guidance of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It tries to interrogate where India stands today, why gaps persist, and what must be done to align teacher readiness with global aspirations by 2030.

Key words: Sustainable Development, ECCE, Education, FLN,

Introduction:

The sustainable development agenda has always remained as an integral part of education. It is considered the soul, upon which, the entire aspects of education rests. It is therefore, considered as the core of education especially after the United Nation made it an agenda item.

In 2002, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) under its section-x adopted the Millennium Development Goal 2. This was to achieve the universal primary education by 2015. The Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (DFAEA) desired to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005". In 2005, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched UN decade of education for sustainable development. Thus, it was decided that education should carry its key role in shaping values that support sustainable development so that sustainable society could be consolidated. Thus, the final report was published and launched in 2014 at Nagoya, Japan. Consequently, the JPOI made it mandatory to "integrate sustainable development into formal education at all levels" through formal, in-formal or non-formal education opportunities. Thus, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) acquired growing international recognition and became a prominent enabler for sustainable development. As a result, in 2014, the Muscat Agreement adopted the Global Education for All

Meeting (GEM) and contextualize it in terms of sustainability. Finally, the proposal for SDGs were started being developed by the Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly which included ESD in its targets as an agenda item after 2015. The SDG were formulated to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all” and included a set of other targets. The outcome conference report on sustainable development at the Rio de Janeiro summit ‘future we want’ integrated sustainable development and sustainable development activity into education under its report paragraph 233. This is where it can be said that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) started being seen from the lens of sustainable development and bringing sustainable development activity at its core.

Early Childhood Care and Education is a significant area of educational stage. It has become a vital area of enacting policy and doing research across the globe. Several countries are investing their resources in enacting, implementing, researching, strengthening and improving Early Childhood Care and Education. The focus upon this stage of childhood across the globe must be seen in terms of its being crucial and highly significant. This is a stage where a child continuously and holistically develops themselves in terms of socio-emotional, physical, linguistic, cognitive aspects. However, unlike any other species, a child cannot develop themselves without the intervention of elders. This is why, the intervention of elders in the developmental phase of ECCE matters a lot.

This article critically examines the readiness of ECCE teachers and anganwadi workers in India vis-a-vis the global benchmarks articulated under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2. The article draws upon the frameworks and the normative guidance of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It tries to interrogate where India stands today, why gaps persists, and what must be done to align teacher readiness with global aspirations by 2030.

Foundational literacy and numeracy:

It is considered that foundational literacy and numeracy in tandem with technology enabled learning environment has the ability to create inclusive quality education system with lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. It constructs the foundation among early children so as to promote lifelong learning for the futuristic work. As a result, the NIPUN Bharat Mission of government of India has desired ‘to ‘achieve universal acquisition of foundational learning and literacy (FLN) skills by 2026-27’ (IPEWG, 2023). The government of India in this venture dedicated a financial allocation of Rs. 59,556.04 (INR) for the early childhood care and education during the programme annual budget 2022-23. This shows that the government of India has a separate dedication for promoting and caring early childhood care and education in the country. The programme endeavors to accomplish proficiency

in FLN for all children between the age group of 3-9 years by the end of grade 3. However, children consisting of grades 4 & 5 but lack skills, will be given individual guidance and support along with additional graded learning materials, so that they acquire necessary skills. As a result, NIPUN Bharat Mission utilizes a five-tier approach to maintain partnership. This partnership has been formulated among national, state and district entities, blocks/clusters levels, schools/communities level, teachers and parents level in order to develop a long term action plans. As a result of such partnership the states has to develop a five-year plans based on the local context. They also use a national tracker, that is based on 22 key performance indicators (KPIs) for monitoring. Further, the capacity-building programmes are also offered for the officials of education department, teacher educators, academic resource persons and teachers. National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) is the apex body that is develops new textbooks and course materials for the foundational learning and ECCE.

Why teacher readiness matters in the early years?

Looking Early Childhood Care and Education in India at through micro lens suggests that it occupies a paradoxical position. This is because, on the one hand, it is constitutionally acknowledged as vital and the holistic development of children. Further, it is also acknowledged for the first time under National Education Policy 2020 and under the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022. Furthermore, the restructuring of anganwadi services centers under Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 programme of the government of India also acknowledge it as vital area. However, on the other hand, the ECCE sector continually struggle with the fragmented governance, uneven quality, and chronic undervaluation of its workforce. The quality of anganwadi services centers across India has also been reported by several researches that it continues to offer poor quality. It is at the heart of this contradiction that the question of teacher readiness lies.

Teacher readiness in ECCE is not merely about their formal qualifications. Rather, it encompasses their professional preparation, pedagogical knowledge and competence, developmental understanding of child, assessment and measurement literacy especially with small children, emotional disposition in order to address wellbeing of children, dedicated motivation, and the ability to work with families and communities.

This is because, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has emerged as a critical foundation for lifelong learning. Therefore, ECCE also relates to aspects of equity and social justice, especially in the plural society like India. Researches across globe has consistently demonstrated that investments in education at the early years yield highest social and economic returns. This is particularly true in terms of children from socio-economic and cultural disadvantaged backgrounds. The United Nations also recognizes that socio-economic and cultural disadvantaged groups consistently lag behind. As a result,

the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 commits all nations across the globe "to ensure by 2030, that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education" so that they must become ready for primary education.

In order to achieve the desired learning outcomes, it is crucial to ensure that teachers should be properly and effectively trained in age-appropriate pedagogy. They must also be trained in tracking children individually. These training, therefore, must not be limited to focusing only upon cognitive aspects. The training must also include above mentioned aspects to provide personalized guidance and support to the small children. Further, the Foundational Learning Study (FLS) reveals that learning outcomes differ across languages. As a result, the oral reading pace among children also varies significantly. As a result, the oral reading pacing among children cannot be standardized uniformly for all languages.

Global Expectations from ECCE Teachers in context of SDG 4.2:

The Sustainable Development Goal (4.2) shifts the global discourse on early childhood education from access alone to quality and outcomes also. The earlier development agendas used to emphasize enrolment, whereas, SDG (4.2) foregrounds school readiness along with the holistic development of child and equitable quality education for all. As a result, the teachers in the ECCE classroom are positioned as core and central agents in translating these goals into lived realities for young school going children.

Global Education Monitoring (GEM) reports of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasize that quality ECCE will depend fundamentally upon 'well-trained, well-supported, and adequately remunerated' educators. Similarly, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) underlines the role of responsive caregiving, play-based pedagogy, and nurturing interactions, particularly in the first six years of the life of children. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) through its Starting Strong Series, even articulates detailed competencies for the early childhood educators. This includes pedagogical content knowledge, reflective practice, collaboration, and the continuous professional development of teachers. Thus, going through these changes and parameters across these frameworks, certain common expectations emerge. These common expectations relate to ECCE teachers who should possess a strong grounding in child development, culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy, formative assessment, and family engagement of continued connection with the family and community members. The teachers must work in enabling conditions that should support their professional dignity, motivation, and futuristic growth. Thus, the UNICEF, UNESCO and OECD global frameworks recognize ECCE educators as professionals, not para-professionals or volunteers. These frameworks argue for parity of esteem with teachers at different other levels of school education.

Against this backdrop, if ECCE workforce is seen in India, then once can find that it is mostly dominated by Anganwadi workers and helpers. This presents a very unique case. Most of the anganwadi workers or helpers in majority of ECCE centres are even non-literate. While their role is expansive and socio-culturally critical, but their professional status remains ambiguous. Thus, assessing teacher readiness in India, requires situating national realities within these above mentioned global expectations.

Who teaches the youngest learners in Indian schools?

The ecosystem of ECCE in India is quite vast and heterogeneous. It includes government-run anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), pre-primary sections attached to government and private schools, private pre-schools, and non-government organizations (NGOs) run centres. Among these, anganwadi centres serve the largest proportion of children, more particularly children from socio-economically marginalized communities. The anganwadi workers and helpers constitute the backbone of this system. They are traditionally conceived as the community-based functionaries rather than teachers. They remain responsible for a wide range of tasks such as nutrition supplementation, health monitoring, pre-school education, and community mobilization.

This diversity of roles of anganwadi workers has substantial implications for their readiness as educators. In terms of their qualifications, the minimum requirements for anganwadi workers vary across Indian states. However, their qualifications are generally modest, often ranging from completion of secondary education to higher secondary. Their pre-service training remains typically short-term with an emphasis on health and nutrition. However, the strong grounding in child development or understanding culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy for plural country like India, formative assessment with its implication on children, and importance of engagement with family and community members typically remain missing from training. In many cases, it was observed, that, they even lack proper vocabulary to communicate with children. In contrast, teachers in private pre-schools, mostly possess diplomas, such as, diploma in elementary education (D.El.Ed.) or degrees, such as, Bachelors of elementary education (B.El.Ed) or Masters in early childhood education. However, the quality and standardization in all these programme, as well as, across states remain uneven.

Thus, the landscape of ECCE teachers in India is fragmented. Consequently, this fragmented profile raises a fundamental question- can a system with such divergent entry standards and preparation pathways meet the unified global expectations of SDG 4.2? Answering this question, it is necessary to have a closer examination of the professional qualifications and training that these teachers receive for their entry in professional life of teaching.

Professional qualifications and training in ECCE: Quantity without quality?

It is true that from a numerical standpoint, India has made considerable strides to expand training opportunities for ECCE functionaries. Even the training modules for anganwadi workers have been periodically revised. The digital platforms have been introduced to scale capacity-building initiatives. The National Education Policy-2020 further mandated the professionalization of the ECCE workforce. It proposed a six-month to one-year certificate or diploma for anganwadi workers and ECCE teachers.

However, the critical gaps keep going on and persists considerably. Firstly, looking to the training, it remains largely input-oriented rather than competency-based. Sessions of the training often focus on administrative procedures, record-keeping, and focus on various scheme implementation. These occupancy leaves limited space for deeper engagement with child-centered culturally sensitive and inclusive pedagogy. Secondly, the quality of training varies widely across Indian states and institutions. This reflects disparities in allocation of tangible and non-tangible resources, availability of expert trainers for the trainees, and institutional capacity to deeply engage the trainees with ECCE focused areas. The global parameters provided by UNESCO and UNICEF emphasized that effective ECCE training must integrate theory with practice. It must also include mentoring and classroom-based support and stay continuous rather than episodic. However, in India, in-service training or Continuous Professional Development of Teachers (CPDT) shows often sporadic and disconnected from everyday classroom realities. Many anganwadi workers report that training does not adequately address everyday challenges, such as, multi-age classrooms, linguistic diversity and children with special needs. These challenges emanate from the classroom situation on everyday basis and ECCE requires handling these situations. Further, the absence of a clear career progression pathway often undermines the perceived value of professional qualifications. When additional training conducted mandatorily through CPDT, it does not translate into improved academic or economic status, remuneration, or working conditions. In this situation, therefore, the motivation to engage meaningfully with professional development diminishes up to the lowest level.

Pedagogical readiness: Between play and prescription

It is uniformly assumed that the pedagogical readiness lies at the core of teacher effectiveness in ECCE. As a result, global frameworks advocate play-based, experiential, and inquiry-driven learning in order to support cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development of children. Moreover, teachers are expected to be facilitators of learning. They are also expected to be a keen observers of children's interests, and thus, become reflective practitioners by revisiting their own experience with the children.

The policy discourse in India also increasingly aligns with this vision. The NCF-FS also emphasizes play, stories, art, music, and local knowledge systems. Yet, classroom practices often tell a very different story. In many anganwadi centres and pre-schools, pedagogy remains highly structured and worksheet-

driven. Thus, they are oriented towards early literacy and numeracy drills. As a result, the 'schoolification' of early childhood education often reflects parental expectations, systemic pressures, and limited pedagogical confidence among teachers. Consequently, even in case of some of the good schools, the teachers have to revert back to handling the child traditionally. The anganwadi workers, in particular, face constraints that impede their pedagogical readiness. Overburdened with non-teaching responsibilities, they have limited time for planning their lesson, in-depth observation, and reflection upon teaching and their experience. They mostly remain engaged with completing the usual task. The inadequate infrastructure and learning materials further restrict the scope for bringing play-based pedagogy as a part of their teaching strategy.

Looking comparatively, the OECD frameworks stress low child-teacher ratios, collaborative planning time, and access to professional learning communities as prerequisites for pedagogical quality. However, the Indian context characterized by high enrolments and limited support structures. These poses formidable challenges in achieving global standards in near future unless complete overhaul in ECCE is planned and implemented.

The invisible dimensions of readiness:

Teacher readiness is not solely a technical matter. It is deeply intertwined with motivation, self-efficacy, and professional identity. UNESCO and OECD repeatedly highlights that teachers who feel valued and supported, are more likely to engage in effective practice and continuous improvement. In the ECCE sector in India, motivation is rather shaped by the contradictory forces. Many anganwadi workers expressed their strong intrinsic commitment to children and their communities. However, such commitment is frequently undermined by low honoraria, delayed payments, lack of social recognition, and precarious employment status. The classification of anganwadi workers as 'voluntary' or 'honorary' workers, rather than professionals, suggests a powerful signal about how their work is valued. Such de-professionalization relating to motivation, status, and professional identity therefore, has implications for readiness. This is because, it is strongly believed that when educators are not recognized as professionals, expectations regarding quality and accountability become blurred. The motivation further eroded when opportunities for leadership, innovation, and voice in policy making processes remain limited.

Aligning with global frameworks: Where does India stand?

When Indian ECCE teachers' competencies looked comparatively with the global indicators of SDG 4.2, a mixed picture emerges. At the level of policy intent, growing convergence is reflected. The NEP 2020 and NCF-FS echo UNESCO and UNICEF principles in terms of holistic development of children. It also bats for inclusion and play-based learning. However, these seems to be mere utopian aspects when seen at ground level.

Further, at the level of implementation, the alignment reflects partial and uneven. Professional preparation remains shorter and less rigorous than OECD

benchmarks. Continuous professional development of teachers lacks coherence and depth. Working conditions fall substantially short of global standards in terms of remuneration, ratios, and institutional support.

In spite of all these shortcomings, India's strengths should not be overlooked. The extensive reach of anganwadi centres, community embeddedness of workers, and recent policy momentum through NEP 2020 provide a foundation upon which readiness can be strengthened. The challenge lies in translating policy aspirations into systemic change.

Barriers and enablers: What shapes teacher readiness in ECCE?

In India's ECCE sector there are several structural barriers that constrain teacher readiness. These structural barriers majorly include fragmented governance between ministries; inadequate, disrupted and untimely financing; uneven state capacity; and societal under-valuation of early childhood education. Gendered perceptions of early childhood care work further marginalize ECCE educators, most of whom are women.

However, at the same time, there are enabling factors also, that reflect to be emerging. Digital training platforms, continuous curriculum reforms and increased policy attention to the foundational stage provide ample of space and opportunities for innovation in ECCE sector. Partnerships with NGOs and academic institutions have also demonstrated scalable models of mentoring and capacity building of ECCE teachers. As a result, understanding readiness, thus requires a nuanced appreciation of how systemic constraints and enabling conditions interact at the ground level.

Strategies for enhancing teacher readiness towards 2030:

Achieving SDG 4.2 by 2030, therefore, demands a complete paradigm shift in how India conceptualizes and supports its ECCE workforce. Firstly, professionalization must be prioritized through standardized qualifications aligned with global competencies without undermining community-based access. Secondly, training must become continuous, reflective and practice-oriented supported by mentoring and peer learning. Thirdly, pedagogical readiness requires enabling conditions such as manageable workloads, adequate infrastructure, and ample time for planning and reflection. Fourthly, motivation and professional identity must be strengthened through improved remuneration, upward career pathways, and social recognition. Finally, policy coherence is also very essential. Aligning health, nutrition, and education mandates under a unified vision of early childhood development. This can reduce the role overload and enhance focus on pedagogy and innovation.

Conclusion:

Teacher readiness in India's ECCE sector is not merely a technical challenge. It is a question of educational justice and social equity. The SDG 4.2 reminds us that the quality of early childhood experiences shapes futuristic life trajectories. Therefore, ensuring that those who educate the youngest citizens are prepared, supported, and valued is both- a moral and developmental imperative. India

stands at this critical juncture. With policy momentum on its side, the country has an opportunity to redefine ECCE teacher readiness in such ways that will resonate with global frameworks while remaining rooted in local realities. Whether this promise is realized by 2030 will depend on the choices we make today. The choices about investment, recognition, and the kind of future envisioned for children and those who care for and educate them. Thus, reimagining readiness as a matter of justice that we could aspire for in context of ECCE.

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