Early childhood education centres in rural India: Who goes where and why?

Ben Alcott, Suman Bhattacharjea, Purnima Ramanujan and Mansi Nanda

Summary

There is now emphatic evidence that high-quality early-childhood education (ECE) is beneficial to development, but this is contingent upon certain forms of provision and participation. We know far less about what families, who are often far removed from such discussions, value. The richness of the IECEI data enables us to explore both (quantitatively) patterns in children’s participation in ECE and (qualitatively) the parental perceptions that underlie these. We do this in three main respects: (1) deciding whether to participate in ECE; (2) deciding which ECE centre to attend; and (3) deciding when to transition into ECE and then on to primary school. Our findings show that, although the majority of children now participate in pre-primary education, parents’ views on what constitutes good ECE are far removed from those of policy guidelines. Consequently, many parents are willing to incur financial costs and accept apparently erratic progress for their children in order to gain entry into private centres that more accurately reflect their views.

Early childhood education (ECE) matters. There is now cross-disciplinary consensus on the importance of cognitive development in the early years (Campbell et al., 2001; Heckman, 2011; O’Gara, 2013; Richter et al., 2017) and compelling evidence that high-quality ECE boosts such development (Engle et al., 2011; Rao et al., 2013). While effective ECE will depend on sensitivity and adaption to local contexts (Yoshikawa & Nieto, 2013; Raver, 2004), commonly agreed elements of high-quality provision include sensitivity to physical and emotional needs, opportunities for explorative learning, stimulating engagement with other young children, and mother-tongue instruction (Black et al., 2017; Bühmann & Trudell, 2008).

The Indian government’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) marked one of the world’s first attempts to provide a nationwide early childhood development programme (Woodhead et al., 2013). In the present day, India’s government has ensured that almost all citizens have access to at least one government ECE provider (anganwadi), and the proliferation of private provision has
led to multiple institutions operating even in rural areas (Day Ashley et al. 2014, Kaul et al. 2017). Moreover, the national government’s policy proclamations on ECE are based on a framework encompassing physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Muralidharan & Kaul, 2002). In other words, these policy proclamations reflect the aforementioned components that the research literature posits as key to high-quality education.

Yet despite the recent development of a national policy and curriculum framework, ECE in India is still far less regulated than the school system (Kaul et al., 2017). This matters, of course: much of the evidence on ECE’s impact is contingent on design, implementation, and participation reflecting the research literature’s view of what good ECE entails. We know far less about what families, who are often removed from such discussions, value, and how this influences their uptake of ECE. Consequently, when ECE is implemented at scale and absent the ‘clinical’ conditions of compliance and programme fidelity that have ensured a strong research base, there is a potential disconnect between planning, provision, and how families actually make use of the ECE provision available to them.

Previous evidence on ECE participation in India is useful (for example, Arora et al., 2006; Datta et al., 2010; Kaul & Sankar, 2009; Nagaraja & Anil, 2014; Shabana et al., 2013) but typically cross-sectional, which risks underestimating the complexity and nuance of participation patterns. One major exception is the Young Lives study, which followed two child cohorts in parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Still, while the Young Lives study has enabled important studies exploring parental choice and perceptions in ECE (for example, Singh, & Mukherjee, 2016; Streuli et al. 2011; Woodhead et al. 2009), its insights on ECE are restricted to one survey wave during the ECE years of childhood and coverage of a single region in India.
Research questions

We contribute to research on ECE participation in India by analysing the India Early Childhood Education Impact (IECEI), a rich, longitudinal dataset covering three diverse states: Assam, Rajasthan, and Telangana. Our analytical approach uses distinctive but complementary methods to help provide insights into both patterns (via quantitative data) and perspectives (via qualitative data) on ECE participation.

We analyse participation trends in three stages:

1. The first is simply to understand the decision of whether to send children to ECE. We will compare rates of ECE participation across the three states and the factors that influence parents’ decision to send children to ECE at all.

2. The second relates to which ECE provider parents choose. Here we will contrast participation rates in government and private ECE provider, and the reasons underlying parents’ choice of provision.

3. The third considers dynamic aspects of the timing of choice and participation, namely when children enter and leave ECE. We will explore the timing and duration of ECE participation, as well as the extent to which children move between ECE providers.

Empirical approach

We focus on data from Strand A of the IECEI, for each of the three states of Assam, Telangana, and Rajasthan. For the quantitative elements of the analysis, we use 11 waves of survey data conducted over a four-year time frame (September 2011-December 2015). These data cover the 7,336 for whom we have participation information for all 11 survey waves. Summary statistics for these children are presented in . We will use quantitative descriptive analysis to explore broader patterns
in children’s ECE for each of the three research questions: whether to undertake ECE, which ECE provider to choose, and when to enter and leave ECE.

Table 1: Summary statistics for quantitative data sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of children…</th>
<th>Assam</th>
<th>Telangana</th>
<th>Rajasthan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whose home language matches official state language</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whose mother has never been to school</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whose mother completed Grade 5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who had reading material at home in survey wave 1</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with at least one government ECE provider in village</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with at least three government ECE providers in village</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with at least one private ECE provider in village</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with three or more private ECE providers in village</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[n = 2,140\] \[3,074\] \[2,122\]

For the qualitative elements of the analysis, we use parent interviews undertaken at the completion of all 11 waves of the survey. Fieldwork for the qualitative component was conducted in a total of 12 sampled villages (four per state), within which semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of 180 children who took part in the quantitative survey: 60 in Assam, 58 in Telangana and 62 in Rajasthan. We use the thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clark, 2006) to analyse data from these interviews, focusing on two major areas of inquiry: reasons for choice and experience in pre-primary and school. Responses to these areas enable us to explore the specific strategies and decision-making at the household level that underpin the broader patterns emerging in the quantitative analysis. Given that the interviews addressed actions taken several years in the past, the analytical approach sought primarily to identify the kinds of considerations parents discussed, and, equally, those that were not mentioned.

Our empirical approach is best characterised as a blended research design, meaning that we afford both methods equal status to explore different facets of the same phenomena (Greene, 2007). Strand A of the iese data is particularly well suited
to complementary methodological approaches, since the qualitative components is embedded within preliminary findings from the survey data. For example, the sampling frame for the household interviews is directly informed by the quantitative survey. With prior knowledge of households’ background characteristics and participation patterns in both ECE and primary school, researchers were able to ensure that they interviewed a diverse range of families, so as to include broader representation of experiences in the qualitative data. In addition, interviewers were able to use information on each child’s participation trajectories over the prior four years to elicit more focused, concrete explanations of parents’ perspectives, choices, and decision-making in their children’s early years.

**Deciding whether to participate in ECE**

Before delving into different types of ECE participation, it is worth first engaging with the question of whether children are participating in any form of ECE at all. National policy commitments to providing pre-primary services are reflected in the provision of at least one ECE institution in each of the surveyed villages (Error: Reference source not found). Still, it is important to identify whether this is translating into pre-primary participation for all. Also, while academic research provides a clear rationale for participation in ECE, namely cognitive and socio-emotional development, it is worth exploring whether these same rationales are voiced by parents.

**Patterns**

Among the surveyed villages, universal provision of ECE is still not mirrored by universal participation, although participation rates are very high across the three states (>). This is most notable in Assam, where every surveyed child participated in
ECE, suggesting that in this state at least there is essentially universal take-up of ECE. Participation rates in Telangana and Rajasthan were 94% and 83%, respectively.

Figure 1: ECE participation by state

Perspectives

But while participation rates are high in each state, it is also clear that we cannot take ECE participation in these areas as a given. So what then are parents’ perspectives regarding whether to send their children to ECE centres? And how are these perspectives formed?

Parental interviews across the three states find close to universal acceptance that young children below primary school-going age should be attending an educational institution rather than just staying at home. But parents do not necessarily think that ECE centres are the best educational institution at this stage. Instead, they vary considerably in what they consider the best type of exposure for their young children.

Systematic governmental outreach initiatives emerge as important processes that shape parental attitudes with regard to the importance of ECE. The majority of parents interviewed in Telangana described participation in preschool as ‘the usual trajectory for young children’; all the parents who offered this explanation had sent
their young children to a government *anganwadi* as the first step in their educational trajectories, and most explicitly mentioned the role of the ICDS *anganwadi* workers (AWWs) in shaping their view that participation in *anganwadi* was a prerequisite for enrolment in primary school. For example, outreach by AWW tipped the balance for one mother in Telangana, who explained, ‘he was small and I thought what he will do sitting in the home … and teachers also had come to our house asking to send him to the *anganwadi* centre, so I sent him.’ A similar pattern is seen in Assam, where about a third of parents mentioned being informed by AWWs that children ought to be sent to their local *anganwadi* centres. These parents often referred to the child’s preschool as the ‘allotted centre’, indicating their awareness of the existence and purpose of the local *anganwadi* centres in the village.

A contrasting pattern appears though in Rajasthan, the state with the highest level of non-participation in ECE (17%). Here, several parents spoke of how ‘children [here] go directly to [grade] 1’. No parent in Rajasthan mentioned being influenced by AWWs or other kinds of outreach. On the contrary, many parents articulated a negative perception of government *anganwadis*, citing concerns about poor infrastructure, unsanitary environments and a perceived lack of ‘useful activities’ for young children. As a consequence, for parents who could not afford private ECE, government primary school was often seen as more preferable to government pre-primary, even for young children.

**Summary**

These findings suggest that ECE participation is the norm for the majority of children, although not universal. Participation rates vary across the three states, from every child in Assam attending an ECE centre, to a substantial proportion in Rajasthan not participating in ECE over the course of the study (17%). Although nearly all
interviewed parents wanted their pre-primary age children to attend some form of educational institution, it cannot be taken for granted that this means an ECE institution – where doubts exist about the quality of provision, some see primary schools as preferable, even for very young children. However, parents are not intransigent in their views: outreach efforts by AWWs in Assam and Telangana seem to have played an important role in shaping parents’ views.

Deciding which ECE provider(s) to attend

As we have shown, the great majority of surveyed children do participate in ECE (). While we recognise that households will work within a range of constraints (e.g. finances and time commitments), it is also true that multiple ECE options exist within each village, with most having both government and private centres (Error: Reference source not found). Here then, we consider which of these options households choose, primarily in terms of government or private provision (recognising, of course, that there is considerable heterogeneity within each of these provision types). We then consider the kind of rationales underlying these choices among parents – in other words, what are they looking for in an ECE provider?

Patterns

When considering which ECE providers children attend, one might assume that this refers to a single provider per child, i.e., children who participate in ECE will attend a single ECE centre before then progressing to primary school. However, a considerable number of children attend multiple ECE institutions (hence the sub-heading “Provider(s”)”). In Telangana, 36% of children attended two or more ECE providers. In Rajasthan, the corresponding figure is 26% (Table 2).¹

¹ Due to a concern with institutional identifiers in the data, it was not possible to conduct the equivalent analysis for Assam.
Table 2: Across Rajasthan and Telangana, around a third of children attend multiple ECE providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of ECE providers attended</th>
<th>Telangana (%)</th>
<th>Rajasthan (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zero (did not attend ECE)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four or more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>n =</strong></td>
<td>2,122</td>
<td>3,074</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of provider types, households differ considerably across the states regarding whether they send their child to a government or to a private provider. Among those participating in ECE at age 5, around three quarters of children in Rajasthan and Telangana were attending a private (or other non-governmental provider), with figures of 79% and 73%, respectively. In contrast, 82% of five year-olds in Assam who were participating in ECE did so at a government institution.

Table 3: Private ECE providers predominate in Rajasthan and Telangana, whereas government provision is the norm in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rajasthan</th>
<th>Telangana</th>
<th>Assam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of government:private (or other) among children participating in ECE at age 5</td>
<td>21:79</td>
<td>27:73</td>
<td>82:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of children in preschool at age 5</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perspectives

In the desirability of ECE, research literature has focused on provision elements focused on cognitive and behavioural development. Among most of the parents interviewed though, choice of ECE centre usually hinged on more functional matters. Many simply relied on the ECE choices of other parents nearby, or selected an ECE centre where they knew staff members.

Where the developmental needs of preschool-age children were discussed, these were commonly articulated in terms of physical, rather than age and developmentally appropriate cognitive, needs. More often than not, these elements of
provision were seen as something that government ECE centres were equipped to provide. Parents described the importance of care, i.e., providing a space where young children would be looked after while the parents worked. In the words of a mother from Telangana, ‘he used to learn things there, sleep when he felt like sleeping and the teacher used to look after him even if we are little late coming back from the field’. Another parent worried about the health ramifications of distance between home and ECE centre, ‘kids get some illness when they are sent far from the home… I want him to study here [in a preschool nearby] until he becomes little older’.

Other pragmatic influences include the provision of meals and the financial costs of ECE. While the absence of fees mattered to many parents choosing government providers, it is also true that those choosing fee-paying centres were also influenced by cost. Private ECE centres offered several measures to make ECE affordable and to influence these households, such as flexible fee payment schemes, or ‘package’ deals wherein centres charged reduced rates for a second or third child attending from the same family.

Comparatively, only a minority of parents mentioned quality of provision (as understood in the research literature, i.e. opportunities for cognitive and socio-emotional development) in their criteria for choosing an ECE provider. Among these parents, just one mentioned physical infrastructure as a quality indicator. The majority focused instead on practices – such as learning goals, behavioural norms, and language of practice – within the centre. However, parents rarely viewed these practices in relation to a distinctive developmental stage for children, but instead as offering the chance to get a head start in instilling primary-school practices. Put another way, parents commonly viewed ECE as a downward extension of primary school. Also, whereas parents saw government ECE centres as appropriate providers
of secure care for younger children, those with preferences relating to quality of provision were more likely to see these as being provided only by private ECE centres.

Discussing the purpose of ECE, one parent focused on the very same learning goals that children will encounter in the first standard of primary school: ‘ECE is advantageous. They are young, they get habituated to school environment, learn manners, alphabets etc. Later parents send kids to the school’. With the exception of just two parents who mentioned the importance of play, none mentioned an ECE curriculum or ECE teaching with different characteristics from those that they used to describe primary schools. Reflecting on their reason for choosing one ECE centre over others in their village, one parent noted, ‘in this preschool, more than singing and other extra-curricular activities, studies were given more importance.’

Regarding behavioural norms, some parents who had contact with AWWs in Telangana articulated socialization and habituation as distinct objectives for ECE. More commonly though, parents mentioned disciplinary objectives ‘to prepare for school’ or ‘to help with learning’. Asked about their choice of private over government ECE, one parent responded, ‘in the government school there is no pressure, so why will the children feel bad or fearful to go to the government school? In private school if they didn’t do homework they will be beaten up, if it is government school, if you tell them that I didn’t have time then the teachers won’t care.’

Academic research speaks of the value of matching home and institutional languages in early formal education. In contrast, there was considerable demand among interviewed parents for English as the language of practice. English skills were viewed as important and viable, and are a key element of many parents’ preference for
private ECE, ‘we don’t know how to speak or write English properly, we wanted him to study in English. We want him to learn something. In the government ECE there was little English’.

Summary

Understanding which centre parents choose offer three key insights into ECE participation patterns. The first is that for most parents, pragmatic concerns (such as distance, affordability, and reliance on personal recommendations) predominate. For others though, an interest in the practices of ECE centres helps us to understand what parents are currently valuing, and how this relates to the choice of private or government centres. Few parents visualized the ECE phase as requiring an environment and set of inputs distinct from those provided in primary school. This presents an important disjuncture with ECE as understood in academic and policy debates, which view it as serving a distinctive developmental stage in children’s growth. In addition, parents’ interest in goals such as ‘good quality teaching’ focusing on ‘studies’, ‘better discipline’ help us to understand why so many are choosing to pay for private provision. In addition, this is likely to explain why many children attend more than one pre-primary centre: initially, caring needs can be met by government ECE, but subsequent schooling preparation is instead seen to be the remit of private ECE.

Deciding when to enter ECE institution, and when to leave

Temporal aspects of participation are perhaps the most under-researched area of ECE in rural India. As shown in most policy research, the value of high-quality ECE to children’s development is predicated on stable, predictable participation. Fortunately, the longitudinal nature of the IECEI data enables us to analyse the timing of ECE participation in two major respects: (1) whether children transition first into
ECE and then through the early primary years ‘on time’, and (2) the extent to which 
students make linear progress through these same educational stages.

**Patterns**

For our first point of analysis – whether children transition first into ECE and 
then through the early primary years ‘on time’ – we define ‘on time’ according to the 
timing mandated by national education policy, i.e., that at ages 4 and 5 children 
should be in some form of pre-primary provision, and at age 6 they should be in 
primary school (Government of India, 2009). This means then that at age 6 sampled 
children who are in grade 1 are ‘on track’; those in ECE or not participating in any 
educational institution are ‘behind’; and those who are in grade 2 or higher are 
‘ahead’.

Our analysis shows that most, albeit not all, children enter ECE ‘on time’, but 
the majority then either fall either ‘ahead’ or ‘behind’ of expected progress by the 
early years of primary education. Across the three states, at age 4, majority of children 
are ‘on track’, meaning that they are in a pre-primary centre (Figure 2). In Rajasthan, 
around 20% of children are already ‘ahead’ of track, meaning that they are attending 
primary school at age 4.

By age 5, almost all children in Assam are remain ‘on track’, meaning they are 
spending a second year in ECE. In contrast, close to a half of children in both 
Telangana and Rajasthan are ‘ahead’, i.e., in primary school, indicating that state 
norms permitting earlier entry into primary school are commonly followed in these 
states. Over the ensuing ages of 6, 7, and 8, the proportion of children who are ‘on

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2 It is worth noting though that, since education is a concurrent subject under the 
Indian constitution, state and national policies often differ from one another: despite 
RTE, all three states allow entry into Grade 1 at age 5, as do 23 of India’s 29 states 
(Sood, 2008).
track’ diminishes further, such that by age 8 only a minority of children are ‘on track’, i.e., in the third standard of primary school.

It is worth noting that, although state norms permit early entry into school, i.e., moving ‘ahead’ of national policy, a considerable proportion of children in each state fall ‘behind’ both state and national policy norms. This is most notable in Assam, where over a half of children are ‘behind’ by age 8. In terms of progress then, it is not simply the case that children are moving ahead of national expectations of progress in each state; instead children are divided reasonably equally across being ‘on track’, ‘ahead’, or ‘behind’, showing the disparate nature of children’s progress through the early years of formal education.
Figure 2: Only a minority of children progress through pre-primary and early primary at the pace expected by national policy

It is plausible that even if children enter pre-primary or primary earlier or later than recommended by RTE, they subsequently make smooth, linear progress across grades (i.e., moving from grade 1 to grade 2 after a year, from grade 2 to 3 after another, and so on). Ostensibly, this should be the case: once in school, the no-detention policy mandates annual progress to the next grade without repetition, all the way through to the end of elementary school at grade 8.

To identify whether this is actually happening, we analyse the proportion of children with at least one instance of non-linear progress across all 11 survey waves. We categorize these movements as being sent back a grade, being held in a grade, or jumping forward an extra grade (e.g. from grade 1 directly to grade 3).
Across all three states, only a minority of children follow a linear trajectory (as shown by the dotted white bar): at least three quarters experience at least one non-linear movement after entering primary school (as shown by the blue bars). In Telangana, roughly equal proportions of children are in each of the three non-linear categories. In Rajasthan and Assam, children are more likely to have repeated a grade than either jumping a grade or being sent back.

*Figure 3: By early primary, the majority of children have made at least one non-linear grade movement*

**Perspectives**

The concept of ‘age-appropriate’ grades, so central to education policy, finds little echo among interviewed parents. There were multiple cases of children going to *anganwadi* centres from age 2 onwards, despite these centres only officially offering ECE services for children aged 3–6 years. Similarly, many parents sent their children to primary school at age 4. This links to findings in the previous sections: interviewed parents tend not to see ECE as offering a developmental stage that is distinctive from and complementary to primary. Thus, while in some cases early participation in ECE was a means of offering a head start on primary, in others children simply entered primary school early.
Non-linear movements typically had less to do with parental decisions than with those of staff and educational institutions. However, rather than viewing them as a problem, parents often interpreted grade repetition (or being sent back) as an indicator of institutional quality, in the sense that a better quality school was providing remedial education to a child who was not performing to the requisite level. Non-linear patterns were often tied to transitions between government and private institutions, and thus represented a price that parents were willing to pay to get their children into the private sector.

Parental interviews reveal that in several cases children first progressed to primary school only to be demoted again to preschool grades. For instance, in one case from Telangana, a child joined an *anganwadi* at age 3 and after one year was enrolled into a private preschool where he remained for three consecutive grades – nursery, lower and upper kindergarten – thus only joining grade 1 at age 7, one year later than the RTE norm prescribes. In another case, the child first joined an *anganwadi* at age 3 and after two years progressed to a local government primary school where he studied for three years. However, his parents expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of education provided in the government school, commenting that ‘although he did not study at all they used to promote him to a higher class’. The child was subsequently sent to a private school where he repeated two years of preschool before progressing to the primary grades in the same school – thus not only repeating two years in preschool but also the first three grades of primary school.

We find similar cases in the other two states as well. In Assam, the reason many children remained in preschool for so long was due to changing centres at least once and repeating preschool grades in successive institutions. Also in Assam, a child
who joined a government primary school was made to repeat grade 1 for two consecutive years after failing to pass in the annual examinations at school, despite the official no-detention policy. In Rajasthan, a child without any preschool exposure who joined a private school at age 4 was given an out of turn promotion to grade 2; according to the mother of the child, this was done at the suggestion of the school principal who believed that the child was a good student.

Summary

Between ages 4 and 8, only a minority of children progress through pre-primary and primary education ‘on track’ as per national norms. In each state, there are both considerable numbers of children ‘ahead’ and ‘behind’. Parents rarely viewed either as problematic. Non-linear grade movements (i.e., being promoted more than a grade, demoted, or held back) are commonplace in ECE and early primary school, and this occurs largely at the discretion of education institutions. Changing schools, most often from government to private school, but also on occasion from one private school to another, often involved grade repetition for the child. In several, if not all such cases, parents accepted the institution or teacher’s judgement, especially when this was a means into the private sector.

Discussion

Table 4 summarises our findings on ECE participation patterns and the parental perspectives underlying these patterns. To recap, we find that the great majority of surveyed children participate in ECE. This cannot be taken for granted though: in Telangana and Assam, outreach from AWWs played an important role in normalising ECE participation. Those who do not participate in ECE (and are concentrated mainly in Rajasthan) still want their children to be in formal education at this age, but see primary school as an equally if not more viable option.
ECE participation is then an established norm, but when we focus on the nature of this participation things are far less straightforward. Simply put, parental perceptions do not reflect professional perceptions. Most households focus on pragmatic concerns, such as distance, midday meals, and, at least initially, care. Those that do think about quality of provision care about getting a head start on primary schooling (both in terms of curriculum and discipline), and preferably in English. Private providers are willing to cater to these demands, and a sizeable number of parents are both willing and able to pay for this.

This has important implications for participation patterns, which are far from reliable or stable. Between ages 4 and 8, few children remain ‘on track’ as per RTE norms, and fewer still experience a linear progression from one grade to the next. In practice, children’s trajectories in the early years of education often entail grade repetitions, demotions or out-of-turn promotions. This non-linearity is driven primarily by educational institutions. Still, parents are typically amenable, especially when such shifts enable access to their preferred institutions.

**Table 4: Summary of findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>Perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whether</strong></td>
<td>The vast majority of children attend ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rajasthan has lowest participation rate, at 83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which</strong></td>
<td>Around a third of children attend more than one ECE centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private ECE centres are a popular choice, especially in Rajasthan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When</strong></td>
<td>Fewer than half of children progress through ECE and primary at the rate expected by national policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most children have at least one non-linear movement across grades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications for policy

These findings make clear that what policy prescribes is not really what happens. Policy documents’ focus on appropriate environments for young children appears to be largely unfamiliar to parents in rural India and thus largely missing from discussion. Pragmatic concerns matter to most, and the very real considerations of safety, distance, and midday meals exist alongside the more ambitious goals in ECE provision. Realising the benefits of high-quality ECE though is likely to depend not only on provision but also perspectives, with many households expressing a desire for curricula, behavioural discipline and language of instruction that are at odds with the research. Moreover, parents are willing to pay for, and private providers are willing to meet, this demand.

That said, an important implication of these findings is that parents’ views on ECE are not immutable. The normalisation of ECE participation in Telangana and Assam can be attributed, at least in part, to the outreach work of AWWs. The careful development of such outreach initiatives might now play an important role in shaping parents’ understanding of ECE as making an important and distinctive contribution to their children’s development, and one that is all the more valuable when designed to complement rather than replicate later years of schooling.

Implications for research

This analysis demonstrates the value of mixed-method panel datasets. Combined quantitative and qualitative data enable real complementarity, making it possible both to discern patterns at scale and to uncover the human perspectives underlying these. The data’s longitudinal nature enables a more dynamic perspective
on how children move through an educational system, and shows just how ill fitting assumptions of uninterrupted progress are in practice.

Valuable directions for future research include exploring equity dimensions in participation. For example, are particular ECE preferences or participation patterns concentrated among more or less advantaged groups, and what implications does this have for ECE as a purported means to improve educational development and opportunity? Another direction would be to move from the observational, naturalistic analysis offered here back to the experimental. Having shown just how far removed realities on the ground are from policy, the perspectives offered in this chapter might enable the development of more pragmatic program, whose impact could then in turn be evaluated. Hopefully such work would seek to entail qualitative elements too, as a means to ensure that the vantage point of parents in policy formulation is increasingly integrated rather than overlooked.
References


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