Policy Brief

Holistic Skills for Early Childhood Education in India

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Save the Children

1. Background and Context

With the acceptance of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and subsequent developments such as National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (Nipun Bharat) by the Government of India, the country has redefined the early years for education as covering children between 3–5-year-olds to 3-8year-olds, which is close to a widely acceptable definition of early years internationally. However, it has also opened up a massive challenge regarding both the *conceptual understanding* of the early year education and the *systemic capacity and preparedness* to deliver the early childhood education effectively and equitably. This policy brief is based on a scoping study that tries to understand these challenges from the perspective of developing an advocacy plan for incorporating a 'breadth of skills' (BOS) or a holistic approach for education at foundational level. The study uses mixed methods of review of literature, consultations with experts and field work. The field work component was to study 4 different models of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the states of Rajasthan and Maharashtra, these models included Independent AWC with no intervention (to understand the operationalisation of Breadth of Skills (BoS) and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy(FLN) in the govt run ECE centres), Integrated/co-located AWC with schools (to mainly understand school readiness and continuity), NGO intervention based AWCs (to understand the delivery of FLN and BoS through this model of PPP), NGO run independent ECE centre.

2. What do we mean by FLN and BoS? The

'Breadth of skill' (BoS) approach argues for a move towards a more nuanced formulation of ECE with a focus on a skill-based education rather than a narrow focus on just reading and writing. The concepts of BoS and FLN are complementary and the BoS includes FLN but in absence of a clear understanding, they run the risk of being contradictory. Although the focus on FLN in itself is not undesirable but critics fear the importance which the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 attaches to educational outcomes and argue that a system which is centered on delivering outcomes fails to understand the

process which is crucial for such delivery. Despite recommending a flexible, multifaceted, multilevel, play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based education during the foundational stage, the policy in India still ends up defining foundational learning in a very narrowed fashion and limited itself to 'alphabets' and 'numbers'.

3. Findings

Examining the Contexts of Early Childhood Education

We tried to understand three dimensions of the context: the context of the learning institution (AWC/ School/Centre), the context of home and the community, and the context of the facilitator (Anganwadi worker – AWW/teacher) including their working conditions along with their interlinkages.

Common Across Models	What Stood Out
+ all weather pucca building + clean and safe drinking water + space to move around in AWC + hot MDM started (post-Covid) being served in most AWCs in Mah + Immunisation + child friendly TLM	+ playground present in co-located AWC + learning corners in PPP1 + NGO intervention – more child friendly TLM
(-) Toilets (-) playground	(-) Urban AWC – no supportive infra (-) Absence of supportive infra – in intervention AWC (-) schools – restrictive space in classrooms (-) MDM served in schools but not in AWC (Raj)

The findings revealed that the context of early year education is characterised by parents with high aspirations but with little education towards a holistic or BoS-based early childhood education, learning institutions that are diverse in terms of resources but widely uneven working conditions and lack of critical infrastructure coupled with inadequate or irrelevant training for the facilitators. The PPP models or NGO-run initiatives have some differences from the public run centres but there is a wide degree of variation among these models as well.

Integration and Application of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and Breadth of Skills (BoS)

We categorised BoS into seven skills namely critical thinking, fine and gross motor development, awareness of self, collaboration and socio-emotional skills, communication, FLN and technological skills using the NEGP framework (National Education Goals Panel's five dimensions of readiness), the NCF position paper of 2005 and the concept of 5Cs. It must be noted that these seven categories are not watertight and there are skills which can be placed across different categories.

Independent AWCs

One of the key findings in the Independent Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) was that it is not just the availability of Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) and related resources, but the capacity of workers to use those for specific learning is equally or perhaps more critical, and training plays a critical role in that process. Despite the fact that one of the Independent AWC was located in a shared space, and had limited resources, the AWW was able to conduct a variety of activities across the seven skills; she would make children stand at their own place and exercise, in providing instructions to children while doing the exercises, she would also include some words of English purposefully. One of the possible reasons for this could be the fact that the AWW was exposed to comprehensive and continuous training of an NGO which was centred

around play-based pedagogy and developmentally appropriate skills.

Common features	What Stood Out
+ understanding of FLN + application of BoS – varying degrees + Children – group play, talking, FLN – poems, songs – answering questions + question and answer – approach to assessment	+ AWW 2 demonstrated better understanding and practice of BoS- Roti, Kapda, Makan + AWC 2 more vibrant – AWW clarity rationale – why and what of activities – connection to skills – despite limited resources – AWW was trained by an NGO on play-based pedagogy and developmentally appropriate skills + AWC1 – repetition as a form of assessment

Co-located/Integrated Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), Schools and PPP models

The impact of training was also visible in this model where the AWW worker of the PPP model who had received training had a better understanding of the application of BoS and FLN than the one who had attended just a one-time training.

Despite AWC being co-located with schools, there were no clear signs of the AWC and grade 1 and 2 teachers working together. The classroom processes in schools were focused mostly on FLN and the pedagogy was mostly blackboard-based.

One model of PPP stood out among all the studied models, the AWW of this centre was familiar with the concept of FLN, and could also explain how she incorporated BoS in her classroom processes, even though she did not know the term. She had internalised the training which she has received and it is reflected in how she follows the principles of inclusive pedagogy in her classroom activities.

We observed the AWC combining skills and multi-age children through various activities.

Common features	What Stood Out
	+ Nature of training impacted application of BoS –AWW of PPP1 – better understanding and implementation of BoS + Activities – multi-age group and multi-skill based – example sand pit – collaboration, communication, mathematical concepts + Learning corners – free play 'pedagogical tool' – gender and social norms – 'kitchen and dressing room' – discussion on 'round' + PPP-1 AWW followed a more gradual observation-based method of assessment on various parameters/skills.
(-) Despite co-location – no integration seen – classroom processes differed greatly – teacher complained 'lack of school readiness'	(-) PPP2 exposed to only 1 time training by NGO - struggled to explain both FLN and BoS – application was FLN focussed – writing and reading numbers – only few older children could perform – not adept at handling multi-age groups even through variety of TLM present (-) Inclusion – foundational to BoS approach – despite NGO intervention – exclusion seen in classroom processes (-) PPP2 – testing-based assessment approach

The Private NGO Intervention

The project personnel as well as the centre facilitators in this private ECE NGO run model were largely unfamiliar with both FLN and BoS. However, when asked how the seven skills are integrated into their model, they did speak about play based pedagogy where concepts like collaboration, socio-emotional skills. The observations affirmed the implementation of such a pedagogy in the centre.

Since this was their own centre, unlike AWC or school, which are parts of larger systems, the NGO had greater control over the training, approach and functioning of the centre. The challenges faced by NGOs in the PPP models, where they engaged with the systemic issues and dealt with respective state government officials were very different in nature. It was also a time-consuming and lengthy process to engage with AWWs, to convince them about their model, and enable them to deliver their models; in this process, trust-building was as essential as capacity building.

4. Conclusions and Emerging Policy Messages for Foundational Learning

Concept and Branding

One of the first and major conclusions that emerged from the study is that though the term BoS is new to almost all stakeholders in the early childhood education scenario in India, it is conceptually not new. All the ECE experts consulted for the study agreed that the concept is very similar to the holistic and developmentally appropriate approach that has widely been an accepted frame for early childhood education both in India and internationally. This commitment can be clearly traced in India through policies and framework documents like NCF 2005, National Policy on ECCE 2013 and the NEGP framework (Expert Interview 1, dated 11 Oct, 2022).

Box 1: How the BoS at foundational stage is inclusive of and critical for FLN

There is hardly any one and uniform definition of FLN, however it can be derived from the definitions of literacy and numeracy. While literacy and numeracy refer to the ability to deal with text and numbers respectively, they definitely go beyond basic skills of just reading and writing, or just the knowledge of numbers and basic arithmetical operations. The focus on FLN alone in early years can lead to a narrow focus on 'learning to read' while focus on a range of skills, or BoS, can enable the goal of 'reading to learn' even if it may appear in the beginning that FLN is not the focus there. In this context, five critical points emerge from this study:

1. Literacy refers to speaking and listening in addition to reading and writing. It also includes competencies that enable individuals to think critically, reflect, communicate effectively and express creatively in diverse ways.

2. Similarly, numeracy refers to the abilities to think and communicate quantitatively, to make meaning of numbers, to have an understanding of space, to understand patterns and sequences, and to be able to solve problems using mathematical reasoning.

3. A number of these competencies can be initiated prior to formal learning of reading, writing and number or arithmetic skills, and if learnt well, can strengthen reading, writing, numbers and arithmetic competencies, leading to realisation of the goal of moving from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. This is because some of these skills are innate to children, e.g., listening, speaking, thinking, creating, arguing and if directed well, these can lead to effective literacy and numeracy skills in later years.

4. Children view the world in an integrated and connected manner, and the most enjoyable and natural process for them is playing.

5. The knowledge of alphabets and numbers, and ability to read either a text or numbers, may follow or be simultaneous to, and might not always precede development of other skills such as creativity, critical thinking and communication.

The experts also agreed, which was also clear from the field visits, that the BoS was a broader and holistic concept for ECCE than just FLN; the BoS was inclusive of FLN and a focus on a wide range of skill could strengthen FLN while the opposite was not true (see Box 1). In other words, FLN is an important but narrow concept and focusing only on FLN alone cannot strengthen other critical skills (Expert Interview 1,2,3 and 4, dated from 11 Oct to 18 Oct, 2022). The NEP 2020 and Nipun Bharat documents do not necessarily outline these clearly and unambiguously (Expert Interview 5, dated 20 Oct, 2022). The risk of FLN out-shadowing BoS seemed real especially in the context of high focus on low literacy and numeracy outcomes reported in the media (Expert Interview 4, dated 18 Oct, 2022), high political priority as evidenced from the Nipun Bharat document as well as vocal and overt parental demands and aspirations towards that goal (FGD parents, AWC1,2, CL AWC1,2, CL school 1,2 and PPP-1). It also emerged that reaching out to private players, even if they cater mainly only to the high- and middle-income groups alone, is important as they act as pace setters (Expert Interview 1, dated 11 Oct, 2022).

Key Policy Messages

(i) Advocacy with policy makers / opinion makers / media / private providers on the importance of the BoS – based or holistic ECE, which is inclusive of FLN, rather than on promoting FLN alone.

(ii) Development of a clear curricular continuum for 3–8-year children could be developed with focus on holistic, BoS based approach that is inclusive of FLN (rather than vice versa).

(iii) Rebranding of the holistic, developmentally-appropriate ECE into BoS-based could be seriously dwelled upon before deciding; it can be adopted if would help in gaining a broader acceptance of the approach (Expert Interview 1, dated 11 Oct, 2022) but can also be counter-productive if it gives the message to stakeholders that is 'just an old wine in a new bottle' (Expert Interview 2, dated 13 Oct, 2022).

(iv) Resources for research to create/collect evidence that FLN gets strengthened if a holistic ECE approach is adopted and implemented well.

(v) Parental education to be part of the interventions on the importance of the BoS – based or holistic ECE, which is inclusive of FLN, rather than on promoting FLN alone.

Capacity Building of Key Stakeholders

The literature is full of references to the need for capacity building of AWWs, and it was clear from our field experiences also that training made a difference. All those AWW and other facilitators who had received some sort of extended and intensive training (e.g., Independent AWC 2, PPP 1 and private NGO) were definitely better in conducting diverse activities using appropriate pedagogies with children. In addition, the analysis of the literature as well as our study of these models lead to certain nuanced aspects of comprehensive capacity building, which are critical for making the exercise much more-result-focused with long term implications for the system. These are also the pointers for advocacy for designing and implementing the capacity building programme:

Key Policy Messages

(i) Capacity building to be conceptualised and implemented as a continuous activity with elements of training and on-site support built-in. While supervision and on-site support can be at times combined, it is necessary to separate the two activities,

(ii) The training needs to combine knowledge and skills so that the facilitators and other key stakeholder (e.g., supervisors) are aware of the rationale of the activities that they are taught to perform, and can also develop other activities on their own following the same principles and philosophy of BoS,

(iii) Capacity building to include aspects of inclusion (gender, caste, community, special needs) explicitly with both the rationale for the same (why is it important) and skills to handle those in eh classroom/centre (what to do and how to do),

(iv) Teachers teaching classes 1 & 2, and AWWs need to be trained together for early year education on holistic, BoS based approach to understand the progression and develop the ability to grade sub-activities within one activity for various levels/grades/age, and to clearly understand the links between BoS and FLN.

Enabling Physical Environment for Implementation of the BoS-Based Approach

Another major conclusion that emerged from the study and validated the findings from the literature is that though the holistic approach for ECE has been well-acknowledged and reflected in policy documents, the implementation has been varied and remained largely week. While capacity building of key stakeholders is essential to improve the implementation and its quality, that alone is not sufficient; the context matters – facilitators, home and learning institution – all play a role. The enabling environment at learning institution is highly dependent on presence of appropriate infrastructure and learning resources in addition to the capacity of the facilitator to use those in combination of the local context meaningfully. The paucity of space and restrictive norms has been a major issue of AWCs in urban areas. In that context it is important to have certain minimum infrastructural and resources norms for early years education institutions, including AWCs and schools.

Key Policy Messages

(i) Defining the per child space requirement for early year education taking the holistic and BoS based approach into account. This can be done based on international standards and be mandated for adoption by all kinds of providers including public, private and for-profit organisations.

(ii) Defining the essential learning resources for early years education and making provisions for the same. This can be also done based on international standards and be mandated for adoption by all kinds of providers including public, private and for-profit organisations.

The Issue of Language

It is important to discuss the issue of language given that parents are keen that their children learn English while the need for the use of home language in early years for better learning experiences is well-established. The newly released NCF as well as NEP 2020 also emphasise the importance of mother tongue. What is important here to realise is that these two: use of mother tongue or home language, and ability to learn English, are not contradictory goals. Just like the well-designed and well-implemented BoS based approach can strengthen FLN, a well-designed and well-implemented home-language based early education can also include introduction to some English at that stage itself (e.g., PPP 1), and pave way for better English learning in later years (Expert Interview 1, dated 11 Oct, 2022). This, however, translates itself into the need for the centre and their facilitator for better training and preparedness for multilingual environment and ability to negotiate that with ease, and when this is done, parents also see the rationale (Expert Interview 2, dated 13 Oct, 2022). This is because there is rarely any place, especially in urban and semi-urban areas, where all children have the same mother tongue. They need to be encouraged to express in their own languages while slowly can also be exposed to other languages including English.

Key Policy Messages

(i) Promoting acceptance of a 'multilingual environment' in education institutions and preparing teachers for the same for effective BoS based ECE; this should be made mandatory for all kinds of institutions, including public and private.

(ii) This is different from mother tongue education and advocacy for the policy emphasis to acknowledge that would also be helpful. While the main language of the area could be the medium of instruction, the institutional environment could be such that children speaking any language feel confident of expressing themselves.

(iii) Parental education to include this aspect of complementarity of languages, and the importance of home language with clear demonstration of how it works

Systemic and Institutional Issues

Considering that India has very large-scale systems of early childhood and schools, it is important to include these aspects as well in the discussions. The redefinition of early years education as covering 3-8 years of children and the educational institutions for the same being divided across AWCs and school, which are controlled by two different departments, has made the institutional issues especially relevant in the context of adoption of the BoS based approach. One measure that is being promoted in varying degrees by different Indian states in this respect is co-location or integration of the AWCs and primary schools, and the study delved into that issue.

What emerged was that while co-location can be useful in terms of (i) shared resources like infrastructural facilities such as activity-space and playground, and (ii) creating children's familiarity with school, this does not necessarily translate into curricular and pedagogical continuum. Considering that the number of AWCs is much more than that of schools, and that AWCs serve a number of other duties than ECE, the choice of co-location and integration to be left to the local level (expert Interview 5, dated 20 Oct, 2022). These two institutions have had very different histories and focus, where teachers are regular employees and AWWs are volunteers, the power relationship remains unequal, which also impacts the potential of this continuum adversely. In that context,

interventions such as the school teacher being a 'mentor teacher' for AWWs is based on the presumption that she/he is definitely better capacitated in early year education/ holistic approach, which may not be universally true (as observed in the field) and create further divides. The teachers teaching classes 1 and 2 seem much more committed to FLN with ambiguous attitude towards the BoS being desirable for the same. In order to address this, some systemic shifts are necessary, in addition to capacity building efforts as mentioned earlier.

Key Policy Messages

(i) Co-location of AWW and schools to be coupled with promotion of the curricular/pedagogical continuum where AWWs and class 1 and 2 teachers are treated equally with joint capacity building initiatives. This will help in recognising that AWCs work is as critical as that of teachers and there need not be a hierarchy.

(ii) Plan to change the status of AWWs with at least creating career pathways for those who are better educated to reduce the gap in working condition of teachers and AWWs;

(iii) Better and more clear coordination between the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) and Department of Education with clear guidelines and delineation of roles and responsibilities.

Technology

Exposure to technology is an important aspect of BoS. However, we did not observe any example of the same in our fieldwork except in one case (PPP 1) where the facilitator shared how the uninhibited access to smartphone by parents to some children acts as a constraint. While it is important to expose children to technology, it is also important not to overexpose, as it could cause alienation, and prevent the child from learning a number of essential social skills. Based on the review of literature, expert consultation and ideation, following pointers for advocacy emerged.

Key Policy Messages

(i) The orientation on the use of technology to be integrated in the capacity building of facilitators and teachers with a focus on its judicious use while preventing uninhibited access.

(ii) Exploring the potential for combining initiation of English language skills and technology for early years through research.

(iii) Including the aspects of potentials and risks of technology in parental education programme