Issue 23 I May - August 2026

Azim Premji University

LEARNING Curve

The Out of School Child: Understanding Educational Exclusion in India

ISSN 2582-1644
RNI No.: KARENG/2018/76591

Learning Curve is a triannual publication. It provides perspectives that could help strengthen certain elements of the public education system in India.

All views and opinions expressed in this issue are those of the authors. Azim Premji Foundation bears no responsibility for the same.

To cite our articles, please use the following format: Learning Curve (Issue number); ISSN 2582-1644; (Month & Year of publication); Name of article; Author Name; Page numbers.

All articles in this magazine are licensed under a Creative Commons-Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License. To republish our articles, please write to us.

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Editorial Team

Varun Nallur (Chief Editor)

Rishikesh BS

Nimrat Kaur

Chandrika Muralidhar

Sudheesh Venkatesh (Managing Editor)

Email id – editors.learningcurve@apu.edu.in

Edited and Published by

Azim Premji University,
Bikkanahalli Main Road,
Sarjapura, Bengaluru, Karnataka - 562125.
Email: publications@apu.edu.in
Website: www.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in

Publications Team

Meera Prabhu, Shahanaz Begum,
Lokram VG, Sambit Mahapatra

Design Team

Silja Samuel Bansriyar

Layout

Banyan Tree
Bengaluru, Karnataka

Printer

National Printing Press
Bengaluru - 560099

EDITOR'S NOTE

When a child leaves school, there is usually a story behind it. A family may have to migrate for work, or the child may need to contribute to the family income. Sometimes a child falls behind in class and gets hardly any help catching up, or the school is simply too far from home. Parents may feel unwelcome or poorly treated when they approach the school, and something as basic as a missing document becomes a barrier. The education system has to ensure children can remain in school, even when life around them is difficult.

This is what *Shantha Sinha's* article in this issue is really asking. The right to education cannot end with getting a child admitted to school. Children need a real opportunity to stay, participate, learn and move ahead. That means asking whether the system is equipped to support children through the difficulties that can interrupt their education.

The other articles in this issue address the same issue from different periods in a child's life. The article by *Shankar K* looks at *crèches*, and the point is that a child's life from birth to school determines their future. A child needs proper food, basic health checks and someone paying attention when growth falters. A child who is malnourished or falling sick often is already starting from behind, so the care a child gets at two or three years old matters on its own terms. Another article on *skills education* looks at the later stage of school life, when the curriculum has to prepare a student for work that may not even exist yet. Between these two moments sits the everyday experience of the classroom, covered in an article on *school culture* by *Indu Prasad*.

Malavika Rajnarayan's article on *art education* asks us to reconsider what actually counts as learning. A child who paints, sings or performs builds confidence and expression that no textbook test can measure, and yet art periods are usually the first to go when time runs short.

Then there is the article on *residential schools* by the editorial team, which asks a genuine problem of access, but it can just as easily become the easier answer to a harder one of the local schools having failed that child in the first place, and no one wanted to fix it.

A child's opportunities are determined long before they are old enough to make choices. What happens to them at two years of age determines what is open to them at twelve years; what happens to them in a classroom dictates whether they will have choices later in life. If any one of these things is neglected, then there is a child somewhere who will suffer the consequences.

Varun Nallur

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Out-of-School Child: Understanding Educational Exclusion in India
Shantha Sinha 06

13 Lessons from the Field: Running Crèches at Azim Premji Foundation
Shankar K

Implementation of Skills Education in Schools
Nimrat Kaur with inputs from Yogesh R Kulkarni, Deepika Goyal, Maneesh Pandey and Yadunath Deshpande 18

24 Building a Better School Culture in India
Indu Prasad

Art Education in the National Curriculum Framework
Malavika Rajnarayan 28

33 Is Residential Schooling the Right Fix?
The Editorial Team

From the Bookshelf 37

The Out-of-School Child: Understanding Educational Exclusion in India

Shantha Sinha

*T*he article argues that school dropout in India is not an individual failure but the outcome of systemic and structural exclusion Children who leave school often continue to value education and hope for a second chance. However, the absence of a comprehensive second-chance education policy—including bridge courses for age-appropriate lateral entry, residential facilities, and other supportive interventions—leaves them permanently excluded from education, and force them into labour.

Exclusion operates through several mechanisms: denial of admission due to missing documents, digital governance systems that disadvantage poor and migrant families, discriminatory school cultures, inadequate teaching, and lack of support for first-generation learners. Recent reforms such as school consolidation, teacher shortages, and the expansion of private education have created additional barriers. Privatisation ties educational continuity to a family's ability to pay, thereby deepening social and economic inequality.

The article argues that India's challenge is not merely a learning crisis but, more fundamentally, a crisis of educational justice. Ensuring uninterrupted, inclusive, and dignified education for every child requires stronger public institutions, greater State responsibility, and recognition of education as a fundamental right from early childhood through secondary school.

The out of school child

Today's children understand the value of education. When they are out of school and trapped in work as school dropouts, they continue to dream of returning to education. They think constantly about how to escape the drudgery of labour and imagine the possibility of going back to school. Some feel that they learnt little while in school and that their time there was wasted. Unwilling to add to the family's burden, they quietly withdraw from education. They are acutely aware of the sacrifices their parents make to keep them enrolled. Many carry a deep sense of guilt for having dropped out. As they grow older, many blame themselves for dropping out and wait for a second chance.

Outside school, children work as agricultural labourers, construction workers, head-load carriers, cleaners, helpers in shops and dhabas, workers in brick kilns, stone quarries, and sand

mines and so on. In forest regions, Adivasi children collect forest produce or engage in wage labour. Girls shoulder multiple burdens, combining domestic work, agricultural labour, tobacco processing, and bidi rolling. Many children migrate with or without their families across districts and states, often without knowing where they are going or under what conditions they will work. In situations of debt and distress, contractors negotiate with families, creating conditions that force child labour trafficking.

In such circumstances, childhood becomes intertwined with labour, responsibility, and survival. Drudgery, humiliation, and caste discrimination become normalised. Education lies beyond the realm of everyday possibility.

Poor parents: Demand for education

There is an explosive demand for education among poor parents today. That 98 percent of all children in India are enrolled in schools is an indication of their aspirations to send their children to school. In their wisdom, they see education as a means for mobility, and breaking the cycle of inequality. With the hope that their children reach up to high school they enrol their children to enter the portal of school. In effect many of them gradually drop out of schools before they complete class 8 or class 10.

There are children of the poor who survive and complete secondary school education. We must ask whether their educational journey was sustained by the strength of the education system itself. Was there a sturdy institutional framework that ensured that children, regardless of their social background, received the support, encouragement, and protection necessary to continue their schooling? If the system was indeed capable of enabling children to complete secondary education, why then do millions of other children continue to drop out before reaching that stage?

The answer lies in recognising that individual success stories often conceal the fragility of the system. Some children remain in school because of the exceptional support they received through a committed teacher, a supportive family member, a community intervention, or their own extraordinary determination. These are important and inspiring stories, but they cannot substitute for a reliable education system that guarantees continuity for all children. A child's right to education cannot depend on chance encounters, exceptional individuals, or personal resilience alone.

School dropout, therefore, cannot be understood as an individual failure or as a consequence of children's lack of motivation. It is a manifestation of structural exclusion. When children leave school, it reflects the failure of institutions to protect their right to education and the normalisation of educational inequality. The central question is not why children drop out, but why the education system continues to produce conditions that push children out.

Current forms of exclusion in schools

Exclusion remains deeply embedded in India's education system. Children may be enrolled yet remain excluded from meaningful participation, learning, progression, and completion. It operates through administrative barriers, institutional practices, systemic neglect, digitisation, and growing privatisation and so on. The forms of exclusion disproportionately affect dalit, aadivasi, backward-class, minority, migrant, poor, and first-generation learners.

Administrative exclusion: Governance as a barrier

One of the most visible forms of exclusion arises from administrative practices.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 prohibits schools from refusing admission. Yet children, especially those from marginalised communities, continue to be denied admission because they lack the required documentation, including Aadhaar cards and birth, caste, transfer, or income certificates.

A further transformation is occurring through the rapid expansion of digital governance systems. Student tracking databases, digital attendance systems, online scholarship portals, automated assessment platforms, and integrated educational management information systems are increasingly becoming central to school administration creating new forms of exclusion.

Educational entitlements are becoming dependent on successful digital registration and verification. A missing entry, incorrect Aadhaar linkage, data mismatch, or software error can prevent children from receiving scholarships, textbooks, uniforms, examination hall tickets, or certificates. Such problems disproportionately affect migrant children, whose names are recorded with different spellings across official documents, and those from families with limited digital literacy. As a result, digital systems can unintentionally reproduce and deepen existing inequalities.

Institutional exclusion: Schools and the experience of not belonging

Exclusion also operates through the everyday culture of schools. Many schools continue to treat parents from poor and marginalised backgrounds with little respect. They are often blamed for their children's poor academic performance or irregular attendance and frequently show little concern when children remain absent for extended periods. They make no attempt to find out why the child was unable to attend school and empathise with the difficulties children face. Such attitudes create mistrust between families and schools. Parents hesitate to engage with teachers, fearing humiliation or indifference. Children learn that their concerns and struggles are invisible within the educational system.

Children also experience exclusion through their daily classroom experiences. Teacher absenteeism, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching, and punitive disciplinary practices make learning difficult. Many children struggle to understand lessons but are reluctant to ask questions for fear of reprimand. Children who struggle academically often remain silent because they fear ridicule or punishment. For dalit and adivasi children, these challenges are compounded by experiences of caste discrimination and social prejudice.

Children who struggle academically often remain silent because they fear ridicule or punishment. For dalit and adivasi children, these challenges are compounded by experiences of caste discrimination and social prejudice.

Schools are largely designed around the assumptions and expectations of families with a long history of participation in formal education.

They are unprepared to address families of the first generation who have never interacted with formal education before and are unfamiliar with school routines, attendance requirements, examinations, or administrative procedures. They blame the parent for neglecting the child instead of giving the first-generation learners additional support, actively helping children and families develop confidence, familiarity, and trust in the educational process.

School mergers and exclusion

One of the most significant developments over the past decade has been the consolidation and merger of schools. Official data indicate that the total number of schools in India declined from approximately 15.59 lakh in 2017–18 to about 14.72 lakh in 2023–24. This reduction of nearly 87,000 schools has largely occurred through policies that seek to merge smaller schools into larger complexes or school clusters.

The rationale behind these reforms according to the Governments is that larger schools permit better deployment of teachers, improved infrastructure, enhanced monitoring, and greater efficiency in the use of public resources. Yet such reforms often overlook the importance of neighbourhood access, particularly for children from poor households.

For children living in remote rural areas, tribal habitations, forest regions, hilly terrain, and scattered settlements, the closure or merger of a nearby school has substantially increased the distance to the nearest educational institution. What appears to be a modest increase in distance from an administrative perspective translates into a significant burden for young children who walk long distances every day leading to reduction in attendance.

Research from several States suggests that school transitions and increased travel distances are associated with higher dropout risks among vulnerable groups particularly where transportation is absent or inadequate.

The neighbourhood school has historically served as an important equalising institution. As access becomes increasingly centralised, there is a danger that educational planning will prioritise administrative efficiency over children's actual ability to attend school regularly.

Teacher availability and exclusion

Teacher availability represents another structural challenge. In 2023–24, about 1.11 lakh schools—roughly 7 percent of all schools—were single-teacher institutions serving nearly 40 lakh students. Although this number declined to around 1.04 lakh schools in 2024–25, the problem remains significant, particularly in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra.

In many single-teacher schools, one teacher is expected to manage multiple grades simultaneously, teach several subjects, maintain records, oversee mid-day meals, complete administrative tasks, and participate in numerous departmental programmes. Under such conditions, meaningful engagement with individual learners becomes impossible.

The burden falls disproportionately on first-generation learners who require additional academic support. Children who fall behind in the early years frequently remain invisible within overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms. Over time, learning gaps accumulate, producing disengagement, irregular attendance, and eventual dropout.

Privatisation and market-based exclusion

Perhaps the most significant contemporary form of exclusion arises from the growing privatisation of education. Over the past two decades, private schools have expanded rapidly across both urban and rural India. While government schools continue to constitute nearly seventy percent of all schools in the country, private schools educate an increasingly large share of students. In several States, including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Maharashtra, nearly half or more of school-going children are estimated to be enrolled in private institutions.

The growth of private schools is often explained through a narrative of parental choice. Parents are said to prefer private schools because of better teaching, English-medium instruction, stronger discipline, or superior academic performance. While these factors influence decisions, they do not fully explain the shift. Equally important is the search for continuity and certainty within an education system that many parents perceive as fragmented and unpredictable.

Many private institutions provide a continuous educational pathway from pre-primary education through secondary or higher secondary schooling. Parents who enrol a child at the age of three often expect that the child will remain within the same institution until Class X or XII. This continuity reduces uncertainty and creates a sense of educational security. Children remain within familiar environments, continue with the same peer groups, and move through successive grades without repeated admission processes or institutional transitions.

Government schools have historically been organised differently. Separate institutions often exist for pre-primary, primary, upper-primary, secondary, and higher-secondary education. Children may be required to shift schools several times during their educational journey. Each transition involves administrative procedures, transfer certificates, documentation requirements, travel arrangements, and adaptation to unfamiliar teachers and environments. For families with limited literacy, irregular employment, or seasonal migration, these transitions can become significant barriers.

The attraction of private schools therefore reflects not only aspirations for quality but also a search for stability, continuity, and predictability.

However, this continuity comes at a considerable financial cost. Poor and lower-middle-income families frequently make extraordinary sacrifices to keep children in private schools. Educational expenditure often absorbs a substantial proportion of household income. Families incur costs related to tuition fees, uniforms, transport, textbooks, private coaching, digital devices, and school activities. Many take loans, mortgage assets, or reduce expenditure on food, health care, and other essential needs to sustain their children's education.

The consequences can be severe. When families face illness, crop failure, unemployment, indebtedness, migration, or economic shocks, educational expenditure becomes difficult to maintain. Children may be withdrawn from school temporarily, shifted to lower-cost institutions, or pushed into work. In such situations, what began as a strategy for educational advancement culminates in educational discontinuity and exclusion.

Privatisation thus creates a distinct form of educational exclusion. Access to stable educational pathways increasingly depends on a family's capacity to pay. Educational opportunity becomes mediated by market forces rather than guaranteed as a public right.

Yet evidence from several States demonstrates that when government schools are adequately staffed, properly resourced, and effectively managed, families respond positively. Improvements in infrastructure, teacher availability, residential schooling facilities, and school consolidation—when accompanied by adequate support services such as free transportation—have, in many contexts, led to increased enrolment in government schools.

The challenge, therefore, is not an inherent preference for private education but rather the need to build public institutions that provide

both quality and continuity. An integrated school model does not necessarily undermine the principle of neighbourhood schooling. Given the diversity of geographies, locations, and social contexts across the country, there is a need for multiple pathways to access education. Educational arrangements should be flexible enough to respond to local realities, ensuring that every child can access quality schooling regardless of context.

Learning crisis versus crisis of educational justice - exclusion

Contemporary discussions on education are frequently framed in terms of a "learning crisis." Large-scale assessments reveal that many children struggle to read, write, or perform basic arithmetic at age-appropriate levels. Consequently, policy attention has increasingly focused on learning outcomes, competency-based assessments, and programmes aimed at improving foundational literacy and numeracy.

Digitisation has altered the role of teachers. Standardised content, centrally prescribed pedagogies, and outcome-based monitoring increasingly reduce teachers to implementers of predetermined programmes.

A newer and increasingly significant form of exclusion emerges through digitisation where technology is often promoted as a solution to educational problems. Digitisation has altered the role of teachers. Standardised content, centrally prescribed pedagogies, and outcome-based monitoring increasingly reduce teachers to implementers of predetermined programmes. Their professional autonomy to respond to local contexts, diverse learners, and classroom realities is diminished. This standardisation overlooks cultural diversity, institutional histories, and social inequalities, creating another layer of exclusion for children whose learning needs do not fit uniform models.

Further, the language of a learning crisis obscures deeper structural realities. It often locates the problem within classrooms, teaching practices, or student performance while overlooking the broader social and institutional conditions that shape educational participation.

Learning outcomes are profoundly influenced by social inequalities, institutional arrangements, access to resources, and the conditions under which children participate in schooling. The challenge therefore extends beyond learning deficits; it is fundamentally a crisis of educational justice.

A justice-centred perspective shifts attention from average learning outcomes to unequal educational experiences. It recognises that educational achievement cannot be separated from structural issues like inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, administrative barriers, unstable schooling trajectories and questions of dignity, belonging, participation, and rights.

The challenge facing Indian education is therefore not simply a crisis of learning, It is in ensuring that every child can enter school, remain there, participate meaningfully, progress without interruption, and complete education with dignity. Until these structural inequalities are addressed, improvements in learning outcomes alone will remain insufficient to achieve genuine educational inclusion.

Right to education and inclusion

Taken together, these forms of exclusion reveal that the central challenge facing Indian education is a question of ensuring that every child can enter school, remain there, participate with dignity, learn meaningfully, and progress through the system without facing barriers rooted in poverty, caste, geography, technology, or market forces.

Addressing all forms of exclusion requires restoring education as a fundamental right and reaffirming the State's responsibility to guarantee equitable and inclusive schooling for all children.

The Right to Education Act is founded on a principle of zero tolerance towards out-of-school children. As debates on educational reform evolve, the focus must shift from enrolment to continuity. In this context, flexibility in educational pathways as recommended in the NEP 2020 can easily become pathways to permanent exclusion for children affected by poverty, migration, labour, and social disadvantage. The critical policy challenge is therefore not facilitating exit but guaranteeing continuity.

Every child should have access to an uninterrupted educational pathway from early childhood through secondary education.

The proposal in NEP 2020 to extend educational provision from ages three to eighteen deserves support. Early childhood education lays the foundation for later learning, while secondary education has become essential for social, economic, and democratic participation. However, this commitment should move beyond policy aspiration. Education from ages three to eighteen should be recognised as a fundamental right, creating a legal obligation on the State to ensure access, retention, progression, and completion.

Reclaiming the moral imperative of education

For first-generation learners, going to school is never a routine act. It is a crossing over from fear, uncertainty, exclusion, and humiliation. Children enter school sensing that they do not belong. Their language, clothes, caste, poverty, or migration status mark them as outsiders. Yet every child who walks into a classroom from a dalit locality, adivasi settlement, or migrant colony is making a profound claim: "I belong here too."

The Right to Education is therefore more than a legal entitlement. It is a moral commitment that society cannot abandon its children.

It requires teachers who listen, administrators who care, and institutions that refuse to tolerate exclusion. It requires schools that are fully equipped to embrace the last child and make education possible for her. It requires sustained public investment not only in infrastructure but also in justice.

It requires schools that are inclusive and welcoming—spaces of belonging where every child is seen, respected, and cared for; where they grow with confidence and pride in their school; and where education becomes a source of cherished childhood memories rather than exclusion and humiliation.

Prof. Shantha Sinha is a former Professor and Head of Political Science at the University of Hyderabad, founder of the MV Foundation, and the first Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (2007–2013). She is a recipient of the Padma Shri and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership.

Lessons from the Field: Running Crèches at Azim Premji Foundation

Shankar K

For many working parents living in a tribal hamlet, a village, or a busy city, the daily challenge is always about how they will manage with their child. Without reliable childcare, a lot of young children end up tagging along to their parent's work sites, or getting left with an older sibling, or just spending the day somewhere that isn't really built for a small child with no real care, safety, or proper food. This is something we need to pay closer attention to so we can ensure every young child gets safe, caring, and age-appropriate support during the years that matter most.

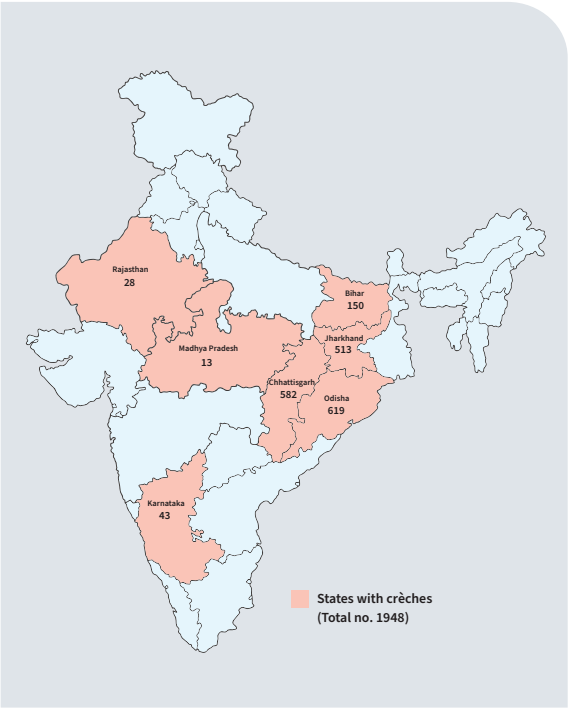
The Government of India has tried to close that gap through Anganwadi-cum-Crèches, which offer day-care for exactly this reason. We've run close to 2,000 crèches through our partners across rural, tribal, and urban areas, and along the way we've learned some important lessons about delivering quality childcare on the ground. We think a lot of it will be useful for policymakers, practitioners, and anyone working to grow the Anganwadi-cum-Crèche system nationally.

Why crèches matter

A crèche, at its core, is a safe and structured space where a community looks after its youngest children, from the age of seven months to three years. When it's done right, the kids get proper care, good food, health check-ins, and time to play, all of which shapes how they grow. There is also a second benefit - parents, especially mothers, know their child is safe, they can go to work and contribute to their family income. The problem is that there aren't enough public crèches right now, and demand is way higher than supply.

What we learnt from running crèches

We started this programme in Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh in 2023. Since then, we have expanded to Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. We also run crèches in informal city settlements, starting with Bengaluru and Raipur. Right now, we support close to 2,000 crèches, and we're still growing.



Everything we do is guided by one goal: improving nutrition for children at greatest risk. We provide a safe and nurturing space, three hot cooked meals a day, including a daily egg, and support early identification of malnutrition through routine health screenings, referrals, and follow-ups. But food and safety are just part of the impact, as a good crèche also helps more mothers to take up work, opens up easier access to government entitlements and ensures better long-term health for the children.

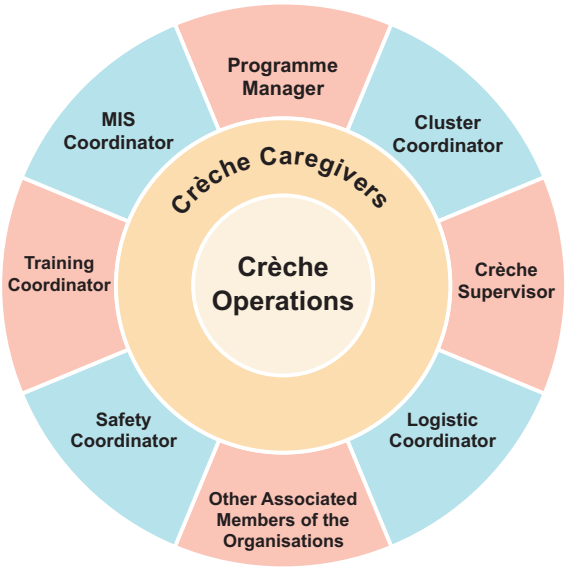
Safety first

Safety is built into everything we do, from how we choose a building to how often we run audits. It is a shared responsibility that brings together caregivers, supervisors, staff, and the entire community. To maintain high standards of care and safety, each crèche has a maximum enrolment of 20 children, supported by two trained caregivers. Having two caregivers present is completely non-negotiable, even during nap times when the children are asleep. We are equally vigilant about the physical environment, using safety gates to completely separate kitchens from play areas to prevent accidents, while always keeping our doors open for mothers to drop in at any time to breastfeed or check on their children. Reinforcing these daily measures, safety coordinators conduct regular visits and run monthly audits against a clear checklist to ensure we never lose sight of these safety standards.

Adequate staffing

Managing these crèches effectively requires a structured, layered team designed for high accountability. At the ground level, each crèche operates with two trained caregivers. Supervision is scaled efficiently, with one supervisor managing every ten crèches and one cluster coordinator overseeing roughly forty.

Supporting this frontline team is a dedicated field staff specialising in Management Information System (MIS), training, logistics, safety, and programme management. Operating close to the ground ensures that the staff can conduct frequent site visits, provide regular mentoring, and resolve operational issues immediately to maintain strict standards across the board.



Care and nutrition

Every child receives nutritious food daily, consisting of a morning snack like sattua, a hot lunch of khichdi with vegetables, greens, and a boiled egg, and an evening snack such as sooji or ragi halwa. Beyond meals, caregivers keep children engaged with lullabies, storytelling, rhymes, and age-appropriate play materials.

Growth is also monitored closely by checking weight (monthly) and height (quarterly). Supervisors log these metrics digitally through our Shishu Ghar app to track critical indicators like stunting, wasting, and growth faltering, ensuring that children at risk receive immediate extra support at the crèche or a timely referral to the nearest health facility.

We work hand in hand with frontline public health workers, including ASHAs, ANMs, and Anganwadi Workers, to ensure that children receive routine immunisations, deworming, iron and folic acid supplements, Vitamin A, and Take-Home Rations. For the most critical cases of severe malnutrition, we coordinate directly with Primary and Community Health Centres to secure urgent medical attention, facilitating admissions to Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres or Malnutrition Treatment Centres when necessary.

Practice-based training

Caregivers are the heart of this entire initiative, which is why we have established clear, practical guidelines and practices covering childcare, nutrition, hygiene, safety, and positive child engagement. Translating these practices into concrete steps ensures consistent quality across every crèche while making it simple for supervisors to quickly spot and fix any gaps.

To maintain these standards, new caregivers undergo an initial five-day training programme that combines four days of hands-on practice training and one day of an operational observation, followed by a mandatory full-day refresher session every month. Our operational staff undergo their own specialised orientations, and the entire team comes together twice a year for deeper capacity-building sessions to ensure everyone stays sharp.

Community support

We have learnt firsthand that a crèche only succeeds in the long-term if the community truly feels a sense of ownership, which cannot be manufactured overnight. It happens when local communities are actively involved in core decisions such as selecting the location and hiring the staff.

By building these crèches with the community rather than just for them, major choices are channeled through Gram Sabha or Aam Sabha

meetings, and ongoing engagement is maintained through dedicated crèche committees. This deep sense of ownership often translates into tangible support, with community members stepping in to build fences, paint walls, and donate fresh vegetables for the kitchen, ensuring the crèche becomes a permanent, trusted fixture in their lives.

A robust technology system

Scaling up the crèches made it obvious that data management is integral to the overall effectiveness of the programme. With over 30,000 children enrolled, we handle millions of data points tracking attendance, growth measurements, and health referrals.

To manage this, our Shishu Ghar app provides customised dashboards tailored directly to field needs, allowing us to identify malnourished children, analyse how attendance impacts nutrition, view individual growth charts, and monitor long-term trends across groups. Because these dashboards are accessible at the crèche, block, district, and State levels, our teams can make critical operational decisions based on real-time evidence rather than guesswork.

Ultimately, this data-driven approach has transformed our efficiency by sharpening our monitoring, speeding up our decision-making, and ensuring immediate action whenever a child needs help.

Our key recommendations

Drawing from our extensive experience managing crèches across diverse geographies, we believe several critical priorities must be emphasised -

Build in rigorous safety systems

Establish clear standards, conduct regular audits, employ dedicated safety staff, provide ongoing training, and maintain a comprehensive emergency plan with a mechanism to resolve issues immediately.

Standardise operational processes

Create uniform guidelines for childcare, nutrition, hygiene, engagement, safety, and caregiver interactions to ensure that quality remains consistent across every single location.

Invest deeply in caregivers

Ensure every crèche has at least two trained caregivers to maintain a ratio of one caregiver for every ten children, adding more staff if enrolment exceeds fifteen, while keeping training continuous rather than a one-time event.

Structure robust supervision

Deploy a layered oversight system consisting of one supervisor for every ten crèches and one cluster coordinator for every forty, backed by dedicated personnel handling training, safety, logistics, and data.

Secure genuine community involvement

Engage local communities in hiring, upkeep, and oversight through regular Gram Sabha or Aam Sabha meetings, while actively encouraging mothers to visit for breastfeeding and ongoing connection.

Integrate with the public health system

Link every crèche directly to its nearest health facility to establish a clear referral pathway for routine growth monitoring, malnutrition management, and timely immunisations.

Invest in advanced data systems

Utilise robust digital tools and real-time

dashboards to track enrolment, attendance, growth metrics, and supervisory inputs seamlessly across the entire network.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a high-quality crèche relies entirely on the ecosystem built around it. It requires a deep, intentional investment in people, safety, health, data, and the surrounding community. As Anganwadi-cum-Crèches expand across the country, these foundational elements will determine whether children receive the care they deserve. While implementation will naturally vary from State to State, the core principles remain absolute.

For us, this journey remains a work in progress. New challenges in staffing, safety, and coordination emerge constantly, pushing us to learn, adapt, and refine our approach every day. None of these insights represents a final or perfect answer; rather, they are simply the lessons we have gathered so far from doing the real work on the ground, and we will continue evolving to meet the needs of the children we serve.

Shankar K is a Programme Manager - Crèche Initiative at Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru. He is part of the Central Programme Management team, where he supports the crèche operations across multiple States.

Implementation of Skills Education in Schools

Nimrat Kaur with inputs from Yogesh R Kulkarni, Deepika Goyal, Maneesh Pandey and Yadunath Deshpande

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 defines curricular areas to meet the aims of education through the integration and incorporation of specific sets of skills and values at each stage of learning, from pre-school to higher education.

These include vocational skills, knowledge, and work-related values and dispositions that equip students for both existing jobs and those that may arise in the future. This goal is enabled in the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 through making skills education a part of the curriculum for all students from grades 6 to 10 and offering specialisation in grades 11 and 12. The foundation for skills education will be laid in the Foundational and Preparatory stages through the development of prevocational capacities.

Framework for skills education in the curriculum

The design of skills education in the curriculum is marked by the transition from preparation for job-specific roles to preparation for a range of jobs, including those that may not currently exist.

The NCF-SE 2023 uses a framework of three forms of work - work with life forms, work with machines and materials, and work in human services - so that skills related to multiple vocations are covered, as shown in Figure 1.

The basic consideration for this categorisation is that there is similarity in the basic skills required for most vocations in a form of work across different forms of work, and therefore, students can develop transferable skills within each form of work and across all forms of work as indicated in Figure 1.

The benefit of this approach is that all students develop a broad understanding of a range of vocations andcan make informed choices related to selection of a vocational subject in grade 11 as well as related to work later in life. Hence, it is critical that all students take up productive, hands-on work related to each of these forms of work.

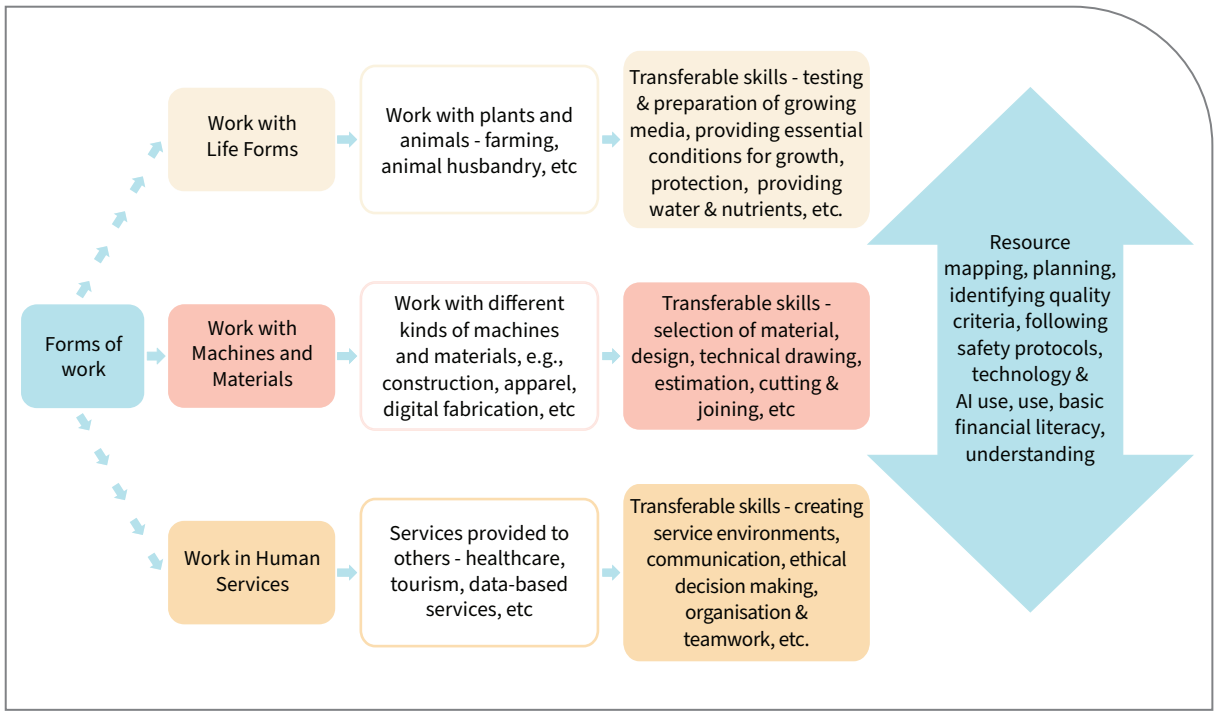


Figure 1: Framework for Vocational Education in the NCF-SE 2023 and illustration of transferable skills

Also, many vocations need interdisciplinary skills. For example, a farmer must be able to work with machinery and ensure a fair price for the produce. Many innovations, such as precision farming that combines agricultural practices with technology, take place at the intersections of different disciplines.

Choice and flexibility based on local considerations

The success of implementation of skills education depends on the availability of resources. The core of skills education is 'doing'. Hence, students must take up authentic work, that is, they must complete the cycle of planning, doing and reflection, leading to productive outcomes.

Given the range of vocations that students must engage with, support is necessary from experts from the community, also referred to as Master Instructors in the NEP 2020. Students will also need access to sites of work to observe and participate, where possible. Hence, the choice of vocation must be locally relevant. Illustratively, choosing crop cultivation or animal husbandry in urban areas will not enable the experiential learning that the NCF-SE 2023 emphasises across subjects. This decision needs to be made as locally as possible, taking district- or block-level considerations into account.

Kaushal Bodh, the activity book for grade 6, and *Kaushal Vikas*, the textbook for grades 9 and 10 (at the time of writing, only the grade 9 *Kaushal Vikas* is available) are designed to enable choice

by offering details of two vocations and guidelines for several others. The vocations included in the textbooks have been selected to cover a diverse range of schools. However, other vocations can be selected as long as the competencies are met, and the books provide guidance on how this can be done.

Access to resources

A few schools across the country are offering job-role based vocational training under the Samagra Shiksha scheme. These schools will be able to leverage the resources already available by mapping them to the framework of the forms of work. For example, if a school is offering healthcare (work in human services) and IT (work with machines and materials) under the scheme, they will have to acquire additional resources to cater to work with life forms. However, the majority of schools will have to make necessary resources available for students. Initiatives like the composite lab model for grades 6 to 10 in CBSE schools, where students can access resources for a variety of vocations in a single space, and low-cost kits containing basic tools, are some immediate steps towards implementation of skills education. This model has been implemented in Uttar Pradesh.

Till full allocations are made for the transition, a model of shared resources across schools, and even the school and community, will need to be adopted. Examples of models used to share resources across schools for skills education include the hub-and-spoke model, the school cluster/complex model, and the workbench model.

The hub and spoke model comprise a centrally located secondary school that becomes a hub for demonstration and training. This model has been tried out, although for a different purpose, at the district level in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka, among other States. Teachers from the hub school can also serve as master trainers for the State. While eventually the intent must be to equip all schools equally, this model can be used to pilot the implementation of skills education and draw lessons for implementation in schools across the State.

In the school complex/cluster model in the NEP 2020, schools are required to be within a 5-10 km radius, depending on geography. The primary concern is that teachers must be able to travel to other schools easily; similarly, students must be able to travel easily whenever they need to access resources not present in their school.

This model enables a great deal of integration across schools, including sharing of resources and teachers as per set timetables. The sharing of trainers/teachers with different specialisations will increase the choice of vocations that can be offered in the secondary stage in these schools.

The workbench model has been used by schools in Maharashtra, wherein community resources are leveraged to enable students to do work. For example, a farmer could allow students to use 0.5 acres of farmland, while a retail shop owner or workshop owner could enable groups of students to assist with their work for a few hours each week. Similarly, a plumber, an electrician, a construction worker, etc., could come to school with their tools for a few periods a month to support students' learning.

Partnerships with local industries and Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) are other means of accessing resources otherwise unavailable in schools. The first step would be mapping at the cluster level to create a database that schools can use. This should be done by the Skills Department or equivalent in States along with the Education Department. An advantage of this model is that students are aware of opportunities for vertical mobility while ITIs and industries will be able to attract students for further skilling or employment.

How to assess given choice and flexibility

Given the flexibility in vocational choice, assessment will need to address two broad domains: common skills acquired by all students (see Figure 1) and skills specific to the selected vocation. Situation- and case study-based questions can be used to assess skills like selection of tools and material, following safety protocols, etc. Assessment of competencies specific to selected vocations can be done using demonstration cum viva voce/presentation and portfolio. It must be noted that teacher observations must be used for continuous and formative assessments, especially of values and dispositions.

Particularly with respect to the terminal Board examinations, the design of *Kaushal Vikas* lends itself to a common paper-pencil test as well as assessment of the vocation students have learnt in each form of work. There are common chapters for each form of work that are mandatory for all students – these can be assessed by a paper-pencil test along with common skills across vocations like planning, creating a bill of materials, etc. Skills acquired in specific vocations must be assessed at the school level with an external examiner, as indicated in the NCF-SE 2023, using tools like demonstration, portfolio and viva voce. Thus, a common paper-pencil test and vocation-specific assessment at the school level will enable comprehensive assessment and certification.

While during the middle stage, the focus is on broad exposure to various vocations, the curriculum is designed to develop transferable skills that can be used across a range of vocations in the secondary stage.

Accommodating students with disabilities

Accommodations must be made for students with disabilities recognised by the Right of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016. First, accommodations in the tasks themselves. For example, if the tasks involve making a shade-net for plant-beds, creating the same protective cover for pots can be an alternative. If the task is making a technical drawing by hand, students with visual disabilities can use computer-aided design for the same. Second, students with disabilities can be offered an alternative vocation. For example, alternatives to construction can be 3D printing of construction material, creating a basic architect's model of construction, testing and quality control, drone operation, etc. However, the range of the three forms of work must be covered for all students.

Time allocation

The NCF-SE 2023 recommends that skills

education be allotted 110 hours per year in both the Middle Stage and in grades 9 and 10, and contains illustrative timetables. This time is to be allotted equally to each form of work. Timetabling at the relevant level must be done with the consideration that block periods of at least two periods each must be allotted to skills education. This is to ensure meaningful engagement with the work that students are supposed to do.

Building capacity within the system

SCERTs will need to take the first step, namely, develop the State Curriculum Framework (SCF) or to adopt the NCF-SE 2023. Once there is clarity related to the policy and approach of skills education in the State, convergence between the SCERT, State Board of Education and Samagra Shiksha would be vital for concerted efforts towards developing an implementation plan and an assessment scheme for the Board examinations in grades 10 and 12. The assessment scheme must provide clarity to all stakeholders, and be accompanied by resource materials like assessment frameworks and samples of tools.

Capacity will need to be built within SCERT and DIETs to orient school heads, teachers and the community to the need and approach of skills education – National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)/Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE) may take this responsibility. A dedicated cell for skills education may be considered within the SCERT for developing materials and designing and implementing comprehensive in-depth capacity building programmes.

As part of capacity building, orientation to the purpose of Skills Education and therefore the design of the curriculum must be included.

While DIETs and block level institutions will conduct capacity building programmes, handholding and on-site support will be critical, particularly in the early phase of implementation. Forums like cluster level meetings can be leveraged for peer learning and identifying concerns for further capacity building. DIETs will also have to develop short-terms courses to prepare practitioners from the community to engage with students, while the Education Departments will have to develop guidelines for engaging practitioners in teaching school students.

Barring a few States, schools already offering skills education employ trainers who were originally practitioners. In other schools, existing teachers will need to facilitate skills education with support from the community and local industries. Besides capacity building in the principles and approach, and pedagogy and assessment, capacity must be built amongst teachers/trainers to leverage community and industry resources.

The mainstreaming of skills education is a significant transition, particularly since skills education is generally considered suitable for students who are not good in academics. This misunderstanding and the negative connotations of working with hands need to be corrected through appropriate media campaigns.

Yogesh R Kulkarni is the Executive Director of Vigyan Ashram. He has worked closely with NCERT, PSSCIVE (constituent unit of NCERT), and several States on various initiatives related to vocational education, and is a member of the Curricular Area Group on Vocational Education.

Yadunath Sunanda Jagdish Deshpande is a Senior Consultant of the Ministry of Education, Government of India, and a Member of the Programme Office of the National Syllabus and Teaching Learning Committee. He is a member of the teams developing textbooks for vocational education.

Deepika Goyal is a Senior Manager at Lend A Hand India, and leads a pan-India vocational education initiative at Lend A Hand India. She had previously co-founded the Karmyo Foundation to nurture entrepreneurial mindsets among youth.She is a member of the team developing textbooks for vocational education for the Middle Stage and Grades 9 and 10.

Maneesh Pandey is Senior Advisor Curriculum and School Education, EkStep Foundation. Before that he ran an innovative school education initiative in Rajasthan. He is a member of the team developing textbooks for vocational education for Grades 9 and 10, and 11 and 12.

Nimrat Kaur, from Azim Premji University, is a member of the Curricular Area Group on Vocational Education.

Building a Better School Culture in India

Indu Prasad

Grants given to schools are typically measured by indicators such as number of classrooms constructed, textbooks printed, and teachers recruited. These are essential inputs.

Yet, walk into two schools with identical grants, infrastructure, and staffing ratios, and you will often find two entirely different institutions. Despite comparable resources, their outcomes diverge because the culture of each school shapes how those resources are utilised.

The culture within a school profoundly influences how teaching and learning are organised, experienced, and valued by teachers, students and parents. It encompasses leadership practices, professional collaboration among the staff and the community, shared norms, and the quality of classroom instruction and interactions. Consequently, identical resources can yield markedly different educational outcomes depending on the culture in which they are embedded.

Recognising this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly emphasises the creation of positive, inclusive, collaborative, and learner-centred school environments as a foundation for improving learning outcomes, teacher professional development, and overall school quality. In doing so, the Policy affirms that educational transformation depends not only on investments in tangible resources but also on cultivating a strong and enabling school culture.

The culture within a school profoundly influences how teaching and learning are organised, experienced, and valued by teachers, students and parents.

Why is this a policy issue?

While school culture is not often thought of as a policy issue, it underlies some of the issues that have been discussed. These problems are frequently seen as separate issues, but in reality, the same causes often lead to them.

High dropout rates

The decision to withdraw a child from school is rarely determined by the child's capability. It is often shaped by the belief that schooling is not worth the time when meeting basic needs and ensuring survival takes priority. The child's experience at school also matters. When teachers

support struggling learners and make them feel valued and believed in, they are more likely to remain in school despite pressures to drop out.

Teacher motivation

Teachers are more likely to remain motivated and effective when they feel respected, supported, and empowered in their pedagogical practice. Supportive leadership, mentoring, access to and availability of resources along with opportunities for professional collaboration enable them to navigate the complexities of the classroom. In their absence, the cumulative challenges of teaching can quickly erode motivation and professional commitment.

Learning outcomes

Even the most well designed pedagogy cannot improve learning unless teachers have the tools, processes, and professional support to continuously understand what students know, where they struggle, and how instruction should adapt in response. These problems therefore require a policy response that addresses school culture, not just individual issues. School culture shapes how people behave and think, and influences students' experiences and everyday practices.

Each of these challenges warrants a policy response. However, policies that address only dropout, teacher motivation, or learning outcomes without considering school culture are unlikely to have a lasting impact. School culture shapes how policies are understood and put into practice, and therefore plays an important role in improving educational outcomes.

How to diagnose the issue?

When we define a good school, we often look at indicators such as learning outcomes or infrastructure. Both are important, but they do not tell us enough about what is happening inside the school. To understand the issue better, we need to ask three simple questions.

What does the school promise?

What does a parent walking into the school or a child entering the classroom expect from it? Are they greeted respectfully and given time to speak? Are parents informed about their child's progress and given guidance on how they can support their learning? Do students know what they are expected to learn and achieve during the year? Do they feel that their views are heard and acted upon?

These everyday experiences are part of what a school promises its students and parents. They are aspects of the school process that should be present regardless of its capacity or willingness to deliver. They are also areas that a District Education Officer can observe and track, but they can easily be overlooked when attention is focused mainly on inputs. NEP 2020 itself places a caring school culture at the centre of the school experience and makes it a responsibility of the head teacher, with the School Management Committee expected to be regularly sensitised to it. Yet there is no clear mechanism to track whether this promise is being fulfilled.

What does the school deliver?

Does the teacher who walks into the classroom know how to engage her students? Does she know how to teach the concept, or does she rely mainly on reading from the textbook? When students begin to disengage, does she know how to bring their attention back, or does she resort to the cane? Does she use different activities to help students understand a concept, or does she

use the same approach to introduce, explain, and assess it?

These questions are about pedagogy, which is central to learning but often receives less attention than other aspects of schooling.

What does the student need?

Do schools recognise that students come with different levels of exposure, background knowledge, and readiness to learn? Do they make an effort to bridge these gaps and help students catch up? Do schools have ways to motivate students and respond to their individual needs, or is it simply business as usual?

These questions are about student preparedness and the school's ability to recognise and respond to where each student is starting from.

What does this mean for policy?

Every school is different, and its culture develops through the processes and practices that become part of everyday school life. Building a strong school culture depends on having both autonomy and capacity.

Autonomy comes from trusting teachers, students, and the community. Schools need the space to develop practices that work for their context. This requires school leaders who look beyond examination results and pay attention to whether the school is a safe, respectful, and supportive place for everyone. They also need to share responsibility rather than hold all the power themselves, so that good practices continue even when they leave. Therefore, the focus must be on preparing and supporting school leaders and giving them the confidence to use their autonomy.

Schools also need the basic resources to function well. It is difficult to expect good outcomes without safe buildings, clean drinking water, toilets, textbooks, and other essential materials.

The shortage of qualified teachers is another concern. In many schools, teachers with different employment conditions work alongside each other, with some on contract and others in regular positions. This can make it difficult to build a stable school culture. Teachers need security and continuity if we expect them to invest in their schools and students. Where possible, recruiting teachers from the local area and those who speak the local language can also improve communication with students and parents and support longer term retention.

Teacher preparation also needs attention. More qualified young people are entering teaching, but training often focuses on teaching methods rather than on understanding how children learn. Teachers need support to develop this deeper understanding.

Time is another major constraint. Government school teachers lose a significant share of instructional time to non teaching duties such as election work, census surveys, and so on. This leaves little time to support individual students, work with colleagues, or build relationships with the community. Reducing these duties is therefore as important as improving teacher capacity.

Finally, schools need to work closely with their communities. Teachers and school leaders may change, but the community remains. School Management Committees can play a stronger role in areas such as attendance, learning, and the school environment. Schools should also have a simple way to involve community members and alumni who want to contribute. This can

make school improvement less dependent on individual leaders and help good practices continue over time.

Some final thoughts

School culture is shaped by the many small decisions that school leaders and teachers make every day. These decisions can be about ordinary things, such as how to respond when a student comes late to class, how to deal with a concern raised in a staff meeting, how to respond to critical feedback, or how teachers interact with students, parents, and colleagues.

Policy cannot decide these things for schools, but it can create the conditions in which these decisions are made. The suggestions above are an attempt to get those conditions right. More broadly, every policy that affects how a school functions, whether or not it is called a culture policy, influences the behaviour and relationships within the school.

For policymakers, the task is therefore to consider the effect of every policy and initiative on school culture. Does it help create the kind of school environment we want, or does it make it harder to build one? Every policy shapes, in some way, how people behave, what they value, and how they experience school.

Indu Prasad is former Vice Chancellor of Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. She has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2005 and has worked extensively on teacher education and education policy with governments at the central and state levels. Earlier, she spent 15 years working with children with disabilities.

Art Education in the National Curriculum Framework

Malavika Rajnarayan

The current focus on art education is not new – every education policy in our country has emphasised its importance. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 had categorically stated that art education must be a compulsory subject for all schools till Grade 10. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 has taken a critical step further by explicitly articulating what 'compulsory' implies—all students must demonstrate basic knowledge and capacities in at least one art form to pass their Grade 10 board examination. In addition to this, the NCF-SE 2023 has placed art education on par with all other curricular areas, such as science and mathematics. To ensure clarity of what is expected, it has provided Learning Standards in the form of curricular goals and explicit competencies for the four art forms — Visual Arts, Music, Dance and Movement, and Theatre for every stage of school education.

Approach to art education

Art and design practices are an integral part of most cultures and exist in our everyday routines. While some of our art traditions are struggling to survive, we still have several examples of culture that are commonly practiced—rangolis and other forms of wall and floor art; storytelling, songs, rhythms and dances performed both informally and formally; basketry, pottery, jewellery, textiles and so on. Even the arrangements of vegetables, fruits and flowers in the local markets are visually interesting and follow aesthetic principles, as do other examples of everyday architecture and design—signboards, hoardings, product design, interior design, advertising, new media design and so on.

However, even after so many education policies and revisions, the place of art education in the school curriculum has not gained value or importance. While the mandate of the NCF-SE 2023 is clear, there are several challenges related to implementing art education immediately. For instance, schools may lack basic resources for art education. To overcome this, the NCF has provided 'Nested Learning Standards'—a basic set of Learning Standards which schools with limited resources can also achieve, nested within the entire set of Learning Standards that NCF-SE 2023 aims for.

This ensures that all schools implement the arts in at least a basic capacity using the help of local

artists, and other easily available resources. Over the next few years, all schools should ideally aim to get the required teachers and resources so that they can transition to the entire set of Learning Standards.

Choice and flexibility are particularly important, given that there are cultural variations and diversity even among different regions of each State. Art education must be contextualised, particularly in the early grades. There is concern from the perspective of the board examination—the worry that one needs to 'follow syllabus' and have common content for students to pass. However, assessment in the arts is largely based on competencies and not limited to content. For example, in the performing arts, students must develop competencies in music such as the ability to discern different notes, octaves, pitch and variations in volume, rhythm and tempo. At the same time, flexibility and choice could be exercised by teachers choosing songs that are age-appropriate and align with the curricular principles. All schools need not learn the same song/dance/drama and variety in themes and topics must be encouraged. Similarly, it is important for students to pay attention to how visual artworks incorporate line, shape/form, colour, texture and space, while creating artwork on any topic that is relevant to the students' life and local culture. In dance and theatre too, they would pay attention to body postures, gestures, movement, and speech, while working on plays and performances that they choose.

Thus, the underlying principle for providing choice and flexibility is that the same competencies can be developed through a range of content. This approach enables students to practice the fundamentals of any art form that the school chooses, while also embracing the existing knowledge of the arts through experts from the local communities.

Principles informing the development of art education textbooks

Having a 'textbook' for the arts seems contradictory to the spirit of the subject, especially in a country as large and diverse as India. Textbooks of other curricular subjects have unfortunately set a wrong precedent of being the only source of knowledge that students are tested on. The textbooks for art education need to be viewed and used as resources that guide teachers who may or may not be familiar with the arts, in both content and pedagogy.

It is a matter of grave concern that many students do not get adequate exposure to the diversity of India's cultural heritage. While everyone seems

to know and make 'Warli paintings', very few can name a Warli artist, or talk about their everyday life, beliefs, customs as well as their music and dance traditions. The manner of teaching art in schools has focused purely on the artefact as the product that is to be 'judged'. As a result of this pressure to produce/perform, advanced techniques are introduced prematurely to young children, which goes against child development and educational aims.

The textbooks published by NCERT are guided by the principles mentioned in the NCF-SE 2023. So far, textbooks from Grade 3 to Grade 9, covering four art forms—Visual Arts, Music, Dance and Movement, and Theatre have been published. They focus on the three important processes for arts learning:

1. **Making processes**, which involve hands-on engagement with materials, body, instruments, collaborative skills, experimentation and expression while working creatively in any art form.

2. **Thinking processes**, which relate to ideation, visualisation, language and communication, decision-making, planning, organisation, etc.

3. **Appreciation processes**, which are related to viewing a wide range of arts practices and learning to respond constructively—making connections with your own experience, developing multiple perspectives, empathy, emotional regulation, critical thinking, and so on.

The textbooks provide specific pedagogic guidelines for each art form and encourage teachers to use alternative resources and modify the activities in the chapters to suit their local cultural contexts. They provide sufficient opportunities to explore local arts and cultural traditions, which aligns with NCF-SE 2023 recommendations for having choice and flexibility, particularly in the initial stage of implementation.

The textbooks for art education introduce art fundamentals in interesting and engaging ways, while also giving students room to explore their own interests and expressions through a wide range of activities and resources across four art forms—Visual Arts, Theatre, Music, and Dance and Movement. If a student were to learn art education for eight consecutive years through these books, they would get a breadth of exposure to the culture and art practices from every region of the country. It would instill confidence in their own creative capacities and a deeper understanding of what it means to be Indian.

Critical areas for capacity building

In schools, there is little or no space given for cultural literacy and regular participation in creative activities for aesthetic and functional purposes—these aren't even considered as 'education'. The general understanding of art is limited to drawing and painting, sometimes extending to sculpture; and crafts are wrongly given a lower status. The arts are largely taught for recreational purposes, for helping students cope with academic stress or at the most, as pedagogic tools to aid conceptual understanding in other subjects. Aesthetic development in terms of arts knowledge and critical appreciation is rarely addressed in art classrooms. Thus, implementation of art education is contingent on capacity building of key stakeholders – SCERT and DIET faculty, school heads and teachers.

Art and design practices are an integral part of most cultures and exist in our everyday routines. The focus in art education is not only on making, but also thinking and appreciation.

Teachers are the biggest strength of our education system. They hold optimism, believe in bringing change, and find solutions to myriad challenges within the school system. However, most art teachers in our country are trained as artists and are not familiar with education perspectives or learning theories. They place a lot of emphasis on 'arts training' that conforms to fairly dated academic conventions and techniques, e.g.,

making a realistic portrait/landscape, singing or playing an instrument skilfully, acting a specific role, and demonstrating dance moves that are perfectly copied from another source. School competitions further perpetuate this approach. Students do not have sufficient opportunities to challenge conventions, explore, experiment, create from their own imagination, and express their personal ideas and emotions; nor are they allowed to embrace imperfections. They are rarely encouraged to respond to artworks or performances of others through constructive discussions.

The belief that art education is an essential part of our life and learning and it can be implemented with limited resources must be inculcated during capacity building.

Developing sound teacher education programmes that prepare art teachers must be a priority amongst policy makers. Art teachers (of Visual Arts, Music, Dance and Theatre) would require exclusive orientation and training in both content knowledge and pedagogy in their respective art forms, as well as the interconnections with other art forms.

Schools do not schedule art periods frequently, because they prioritise language, mathematics, science and social science. When students get less time for the arts, where they actively connect with themselves cognitively, emotionally and socially, they are deprived of essential cultural and creative experiences; and also hampers a healthy progression in their aesthetic and socio-emotional development till they complete their school education. Therefore, timetables must be planned as per the time allocation for different subjects in the NCF-SE 2023.

Conclusion

As States move towards implementation of art education, they must inculcate among stakeholders the belief that art education is an essential part of our life and learning and it can be implemented with limited resources.

Given the mandate of the NCF-SE 2023, art education must include exposure to both visual arts and performing arts through the processes of making artwork, thinking about the artistic

ideas and learning to appreciate the arts.

Finally, the NCF-SE 2023 emphasises variety and variations as a pedagogic principle, which implies that arts education should encourage every child to explore the arts through multiple modes and expressions.

Malavika Rajnarayan is a visual artist based in Vadodara, Gujarat. She works as a consultant with the Azim Premji Foundation and visiting faculty at Azim Premji University, Bhopal. She has been working with the Azim Premji Schools in developing arts curriculum and improving teaching-learning practices in the arts across all stages of education. She is also a member of the Textbook Development Team that is developing art education syllabi and textbooks for the NCERT. As an artist, she has exhibited her work both within India and abroad over the past two decades.

Is Residential Schooling the Right Fix?

The Editorial Team

For several years, State governments have used residential schools as an important intervention to expand educational opportunities and promote social mobility among disadvantaged communities. Different departments have established and managed these institutions for their respective beneficiary groups. Tribal Welfare Departments run residential schools for Scheduled Tribe students, while Social Welfare and Backward Classes Welfare Departments operate similar schools for children from Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Minority Welfare Departments have also established residential schools for students from minority communities.

More recently, Labour Welfare Departments have begun adopting this model for the children of workers in the unorganised sector, particularly construction workers. The intent behind this is not in question, especially for construction workers, who are among the most mobile and insecure workers in the informal economy, and whose children face some of the most disrupted schooling of any group in the country. The more important question, however, is whether this approach is the most effective response to the realities these children face.

Different problems with residential schools as the answer

Usually, the case for a residential school rests on one or more of these factors: a school is not available nearby, the nearby school is of poor quality or the family's migration disrupts regular schooling. Residential schools do not address these factors equally. They are generally effective at solving lack of access.

On migration, residential schooling is arguably the strongest fit as a child stays in one place while the parents move, which solves the disruption more directly.

On quality, their record is more limited than it appears. On migration, residential schooling is arguably the strongest fit as a child stays in one place while the parents move, which solves the disruption more directly. Before approving a proposal, decision makers should ask which specific problem it is designed to solve, because that is what determines whether it is the right instrument.

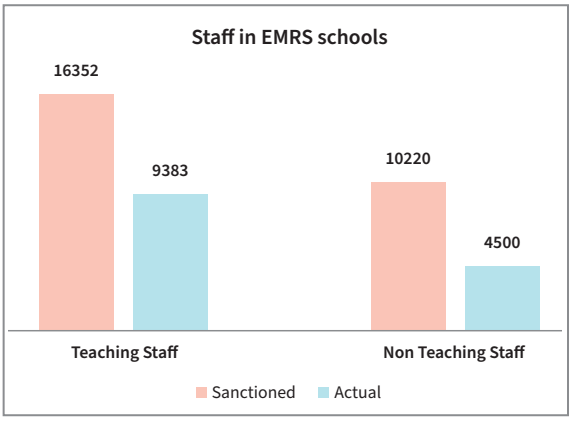
Who runs India's residential school models, and why

Scheme	Administering Department/ Ministry	Target group	Stated rationale
EMRS (Eklavya Model Residential Schools)	Ministry of Tribal Affairs (via NESTS)	ST/tribal students, especially in remote blocks	Access to quality education where regular schools are scattered or inaccessible; in Maoist-affected districts, explicitly framed by the Home Ministry as a way to keep tribal children away from insurgent influence.
OBC Hostel Scheme	Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment	SC and OBC students	Residential education for meritorious SC students from low-income families; hostel access for OBC students who would otherwise drop out for lack of nearby facilities.
Morarji Desai Residential Schools	State Minority Welfare Departments, funded via PMJVK (Ministry of Minority Affairs)	Students from notified minority communities	Raising enrolment, retention, and literacy in minority-concentrated, educationally backward areas.
KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya)	Ministry of Education, via Samagra Shiksha	Girls from SC/ST/OBC/ minority/BPL families in educationally backward blocks	Closing the gender gap in enrolment and retention at upper-primary/secondary level, where distance and safety keep girls out of school.
Residential schools in LWE-affected districts	Coordinated by Ministry of Home Affairs, delivered largely through EMRS (Tribal Affairs)	Tribal children in Maoist-affected blocks	Restoring access to schooling disrupted by conflict; explicitly described by government officials as a way to dissuade children from Maoist recruitment.

What this actually costs

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) programme, the central government's flagship residential model for tribal children, offers the clearest available benchmark, because it is the most fully costed of these networks. Each EMRS carries a one-time capital cost of roughly INR 37.8 crore in plain areas rising to INR 48 crore in hilly, northeastern, or extremism affected regions. For a school with a sanctioned capacity of 480 students, plus a recurring per-student cost that has been revised upward to roughly INR 1.47 lakh a year. An analysis ought to be made of what this money would buy if it were spent instead on teacher vacancies, transport, hostel/ day boarding, or remedial support in the schools these children would otherwise attend.

Implementation bottlenecks present a second layer of concern. A 2023 parliamentary review found only 58 percent of sanctioned EMRS schools operational, with just 73 percent of the annual budget spent. Because capital-intensive residential infrastructure is slow, expensive, and prone to underdelivery. The existing staffing of the EMRS schools are given below.



Source - https://nests.tribal.gov.in/

A harder question that we need to answer

Removing a child from their family and community for an entire school year, repeated across their most formative years, is a form of segregation. This breaks a child's continuity in language and culture, and takes them away from their community during the years relationships matter most.

Migration for livelihoods is an exception to this argument. Construction workers move between sites, so simply strengthening the local school doesn't work, since the family will be relocating. The workaround is a hostel timed to the family's migration cycle, where children live but continue attending the existing local school rather than a separate school built just for them. This keeps the child within the local system, in their own language and community, while solving the actual problem of not having a stable home during the school year. It is very different from building an entirely new school alongside the hostel. Approving a new school when only a hostel is needed is exactly the kind of mistake that should be avoided.

Removing a child from their family and community for an entire school year, repeated across their most formative years, is a form of segregation. This breaks a child's continuity in language and culture, and takes them away from their community during the years relationships matter most.

Several States already fund construction workers' education without building separate residential schools. Delhi and Punjab's Labour Welfare Boards provide direct financial assistance to these children. Maharashtra and Gujarat's Labour Welfare Funds issue textbook, uniform, and other allowances to keep children enrolled in their local schools instead of moving them into a new institution. If these models already keep children within the local system at a fraction of the cost, then other States need to examine why they are choosing the more expensive path.

Who should run the school?

There is a more basic problem underneath all of this. Running a school well takes specific expertise, of understanding how children learn at different ages, and training and supporting teachers to do this work well. This is the core competence of the Department of School Education and Literacy, built over decades through bodies like the SCERT and the DIETs. It is not the core competence of departments whose real expertise lies in registering workers and running welfare boards.

This shows up as fragmentation on the ground. Tribal welfare, social welfare, minority welfare, and now labour departments each run their own residential schools, with their own textbooks and their own systems for recruiting and training teachers, with no common academic standard across them. A child's quality of education ends up depending on which department happens to run the school they were placed in.

The more coherent design is a division that matches each department's actual strength. Welfare departments are well placed to identify eligible families, fund hostels and provide stipends. They are not well placed to design curriculum, train teachers, or run an academic institution. For example, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas are similarly residential and serve a comparable rural intake, but sit under the Ministry of Education with a unified curriculum and teacher pipeline. They recorded a 99.3 percent Class 12 pass rate in 2025. EMRS, administered through a welfare-linked structure with fragmented board affiliation and a separate recruitment pipeline, recorded 82.8 percent in the same period, below the national government-school average. The residential model doesn't explain the gap. The administrative home of academic delivery does. Academic delivery should sit under the Department of School Education and

Literacy, using the same curriculum, textbooks, and teacher training pipeline as every other government school in the State.

None of this addresses the deeper issue driving the whole debate. Residential schools exist partly because local schools are not always safe or welcoming for every child, because of caste, community, migration, or simple neglect and moving a child to a residential campus won't fix that. The more sustainable path is to strengthen the local school system so no child needs to be separated from their family to escape a problem in the first place. Until that underlying issue is addressed directly, in classrooms, in staffrooms, and in how local schools treat the children of construction workers, Dalit families, or minority communities, residential schools will keep being used as a workaround for something the State hasn't fixed at the root.

What needs to be done?

Before a new residential school proposal for any newly defined population is cleared, four questions should be non-negotiable. Good intentions alone can't be acceptable.

1. Which problem, among access, quality or migration is this proposal actually solving? A clear answer, backed by evidence, is required.
2. What does a residential seat cost, compared with creating K-12 in panchayats or secondary/ senior secondary schools in geographic proximity to elementary schools?
3. Is the design actually suited to the problem? A mobile population may need a seasonal hostel attached to the local school, not a full residential school modelled on institutions built for settled communities.
4. What safeguards are built in from the start? This includes oversight by parents and local bodies, instruction in the child's home language, an independent grievance mechanism, and a clear path back to a local school.

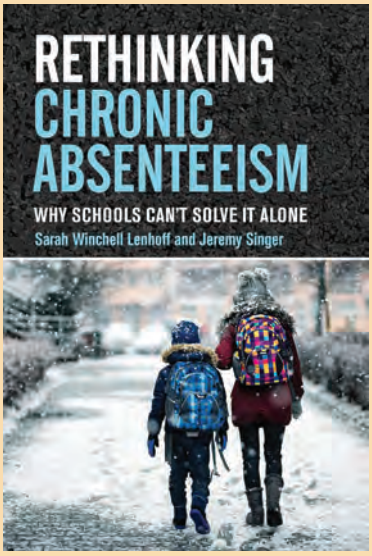
Conclusion

Across tribal welfare, backward classes, minority welfare, and now labour departments, the same pattern persists. Instead of investing in local schools and addressing why families send their children away, the response is to build new residential schools. Such schools are more visible than fixing scattered local government schools, making them administratively easier. The way forward is to be honest about what each proposal seeks to solve.

Academic delivery should rest with those who have genuine education expertise, while the root causes pushing families to send their children away must be addressed.

Printed and published by Rishikesh B S, Registrar on behalf of Azim Premji University.
Printed at National Printing Press, # 212/1, Phase 3, 3rd Main Road, Bommasandra Industrial Area, Bengaluru, Karnataka – 560 099
Published at Azim Premji University, Survey No 66, Burugunte Village, Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura, Bengaluru, Karnataka 562 125
Editor: Varun Nallur

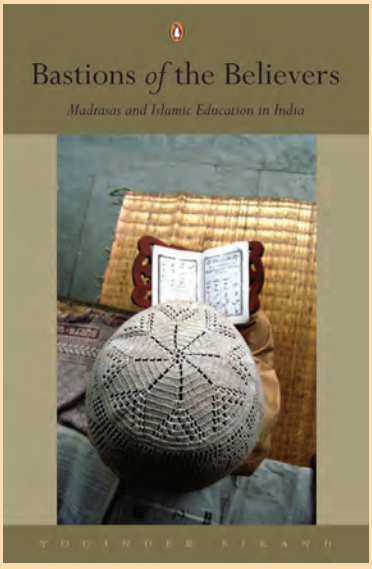
From the Bookshelf



Rethinking Chronic Absenteeism: Why Schools Can't Solve It Alone
by Sarah Winchell Lenhoff and Jeremy Singer

Harvard Education Press, 208 Pages

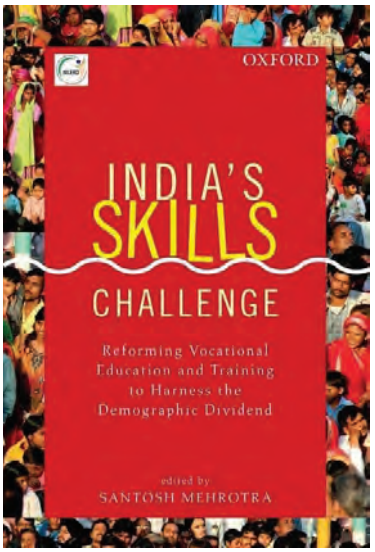
Rethinking Chronic Absenteeism challenges the view that student absence is solely a school accountability issue. Drawing on eight years of research, it shows how poverty, family circumstances, and community inequalities shape attendance. The authors advocate relationship-building, family support, and community-based, collaborative approaches to help children attend and succeed in school.



Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India
by Yoginder Sikand

Penguin, 400 pages

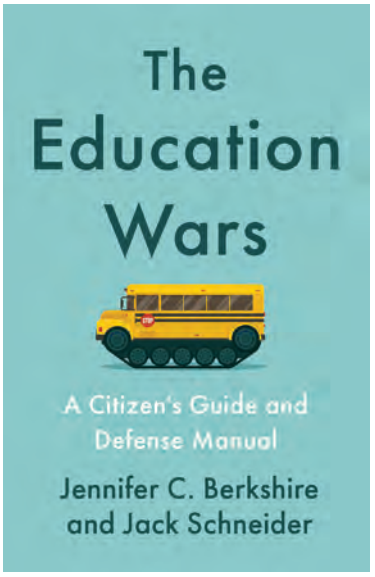
Bastions of the Believers offers a nuanced, field-based examination of madrasas and Islamic education in India, tracing their history, diversity, regional variations, educational practices, and contemporary contexts. Drawing on visits to madrasas and conversations with scholars, the author examines curricula and debates on reform, modernisation, and traditional Islamic learning, offering a balanced perspective on how madrasa education can respond to changing social and educational needs.



India's Skills Challenge: Reforming Vocational Education and Training to Harness the Demographic Dividend edited by Santosh Mehrotra

Oxford University Press, 324 pages

India's workforce is growing, but its skills are not keeping pace with a rapidly changing economy. This book examines gaps in the vocational education and training system and the reforms needed to address them. Drawing on evidence from training providers and industry, it explores how schools, higher education, government and employers can build a stronger skills ecosystem and a more skilled, productive and employable workforce.



The Education Wars - A Citizen's Guide and Defence Manual by Jennifer C. Berkshire and Jack Schneider

The New Press, 173 pages

In The Education Wars, the authors make a compelling case for public education as a public good and a cornerstone of democracy. The book examines the growing forces reshaping American education and the competing visions of what schools should be and whom they should serve. It challenges the arguments driving the push towards greater privatisation while showing how these shifts can deepen inequality and weaken public schools. Above all, it offers a clear and practical guide to understanding and defending the idea of education as a shared public responsibility.

Azim Premji University

Not everyone can move cities for a diploma.

So we moved the classroom.

Designed to make learning accessible, our hybrid Postgraduate Diplomas allow you to study from where you are. With online sessions, supported by short campus engagements, the structure helps you learn while continuing with your work or responsibilities.

Programmes Offered:
Development Leadership
Educational Assessment
Early Childhood Education
Inclusive Education
Teaching Children with Learning Disabilities

Scan to know more

APPLY NOW

Campuses: **Bengaluru | Bhopal | Ranchi**
Programmes: **Undergraduate | Postgraduate | Diplomas & Certificates**

ISSUE

23

About us

Learning Curve is a magazine reimagined for those shaping and influencing education policy and practice. It serves as a resource for policymakers, bureaucrats, government officials, and key decision-makers in public education.

The magazine delves into education policy, implementation, curriculum design, financing, and systemic reforms, offering insights into their real-world impact. Through expert analysis, case studies, and discussions on emerging trends, *Learning Curve* bridges the gap between policy and practice to support informed decision-making for a stronger education system.

Azim Premji University
Bengaluru | Bhopal | Ranchi

Website: azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in **Facebook:** /azimpremjiuniversity
YouTube: @azimpremjiuniversity **Instagram:** @azimpremjiuniv **X:** @azimpremjiuniv

Address: Survey No. 66, Burugunte Village, Bikkanahalli Main Road, Bengaluru, Karnataka 562125