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Understanding the Challenges in Implementing NEP 2020: Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in Anganwadi Centres After COVID-19

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 sets an ambitious target of achieving foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) for all children by Grade 3. This is a fundamental step toward improving the quality of education in India. However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed unexpected challenges that disrupted early learning across the country. Children in marginalized and tribal areas, already at risk of educational deprivation, were disproportionately affected. This paper focuses on the lived experiences of Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) in a tribal region of West Bengal. Based on qualitative interviews with 35 AWWs, it investigates the ways in which the pandemic influenced children's foundational learning, health, and social behaviour. The findings suggest considerable setbacks in FLN outcomes and reveal how limited resources, inadequate training, and lack of digital access restricted the implementation of meaningful educational interventions. The study proposes a set of practical recommendations to support the integration of NEP 2020 principles in real-world early childhood education (ECE) contexts. It emphasizes the need for continuous support, capacity building, and community engagement to ensure that children in these regions do not fall further behind.

Keywords: *FLN, Challenges of the AWW/Teacher, Learning Outcome, Post COVID-19 Scenario.*

Introduction

The foundational years of a child's life are crucial in shaping their educational trajectory. Recognizing this, NEP 2020 emphasizes strengthening early childhood care and education (ECCE) through targeted interventions, especially in the 3–8 years age group (Government of India, 2020). A major shift under NEP is the inclusion of Anganwadi Centres as essential providers of early education alongside pre-primary schools. However, implementing this vision across diverse socio-economic and geographic regions has presented significant challenges. In October 2019, the World Bank introduced the term "learning poverty" to analyze the gap in quality education. It is defined as the percentage of 10-years old who cannot read or understand a simple story. The primary school dropout rate has declined with time in this state. According to the Annual State of Education Report (ASER), 2020, the state has reported a primary school dropout rate of only 1.5% compared to the national dropout rate of 5.5%. The state has also held the first position in providing

textbooks and scholarships to the children. With the immense effort, children are now in school but are they learning (DISE 2009)? ASER 2018 report shows only 29.2% of the students from Class 5 can do essential addition and subtraction of Class 2, which means 70.8% of students though attending schools are not learning. The figure was the same a decade ago; ASER 2008 report has shown 29.4% of the student of Class 5 could solve numerical problems of Class 2. So, in these 10 years, though enrolment has increased, nothing had added in terms of learning (Tables 1, 2). However, the picture is slightly encouraging at FLN level or Class 3. About 58% of Class 3 students could recognize double-digit numbers (1–99), and the situation gradually improves.

Table 1: Foundational Numeracy Level

Class	Not Even	Recognise Numbers		Subtract	Divide	Total
	1–9	1–9	10–99			
1	20.4	43.1	25.8	8.2	2.5	100
2	6.7	33.2	33.3	18.0	8.9	100
3	4.2	24.5	32.9	20.3	18.2	100

Source: ASER (2018).

Foundational Literacy Level

Class	Not Even a Letter	Letter	Word	Class 1 Level Text	Class 2 Level Text	Total
1	24.8	33.3	22.8	10.9	8.2	100
2	10.3	20.6	24.6	21.0	23.5	100
3	8.3	16.0	16.3	19.4	40.0	100

Source: ASER (2018).

Visual Illustrations from ASER 2018 Data

Figure 1: Class 3 Reading Levels Breakdown (ASER, 2018)

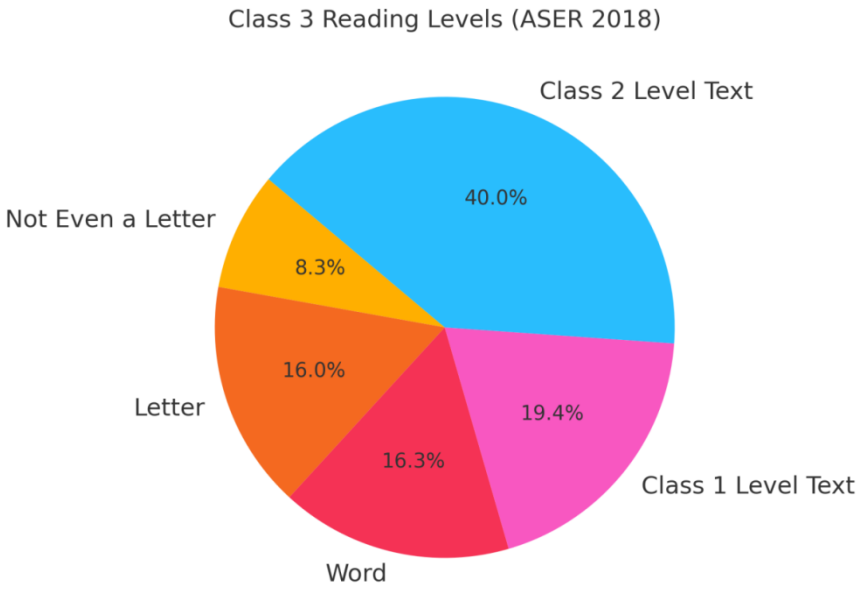
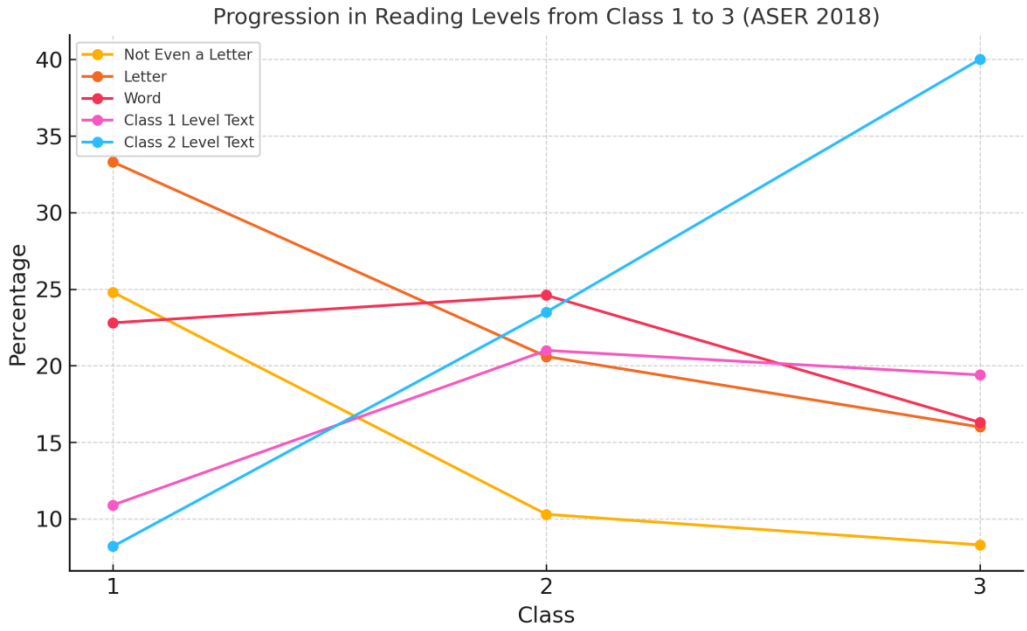


Figure 2: Progression in Reading Levels from Class 1 to 3 (ASER, 2018)



Children in these areas face educational disadvantages even under normal circumstances. COVID-19 significantly exacerbated these issues (World Bank, 2018). When learning shifted away from physical spaces, many young children missed crucial developmental milestones. Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), central to delivering early education and care, had to adapt quickly, often with limited resources. This study seeks to understand how AWWs managed this transformation, what they observed in children, and what kind of support systems they envision moving forward.

Review of Literature

Foundational literacy and numeracy refer to the basic ability to read and understand simple texts, write coherently, and perform basic arithmetic operations. International frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) and the World Bank's concept of "learning poverty" highlight the importance of acquiring these skills early in life. According to Grantham-McGregor et al. (2007), over 85% of brain development occurs before the age of six, making early childhood a critical phase for intervention.

The Indian government has introduced multiple reforms over the years to improve primary education. NIPUN Bharat, launched under the Ministry of Education, specifically targets universal FLN achievement by 2026–27 (Ministry of Education, 2021). NEP 2020 strengthens this mission by linking ECCE with school readiness goals. It recommends competency-based learning models and emphasizes the role of play-based learning, storytelling, and mother-tongue instruction in the early years (Government of India, 2020).

Despite these policy reforms, FLN outcomes remain weak in many states. ASER (2022) findings show that only 20–30% of Class 3 students in rural India can perform basic reading and arithmetic tasks. The situation is more serious in remote districts, where access to qualified teachers and learning resources is limited.

Anganwadi Centres have been criticized for inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained workers, and low community participation. Although schemes like Shishu Aloy in West Bengal have introduced improvements, systemic gaps persist. Research by UNICEF and state-level agencies suggests that ECCE models must be contextual and responsive to local realities if they are to succeed (UNICEF & Government of West Bengal, n.d.).

Objectives and Research Questions:

This research was guided by the following objectives:

- To explore the perceived challenges faced by AWWs in implementing FLN-related activities before, during, and after COVID-19.
- To assess the extent of learning regression observed by AWWs.
- To document the types of interventions used during the pandemic.
- To understand the current readiness of Anganwadi Centres to implement NEP 2020 recommendations.
- To develop context-sensitive recommendations for improving ECCE delivery through Anganwadi platforms.

Research Questions:

1. What challenges did Anganwadi workers face in supporting FLN among children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did children's foundational skills change during this period, as perceived by AWWs?
3. What kinds of interventions were introduced and how effective were they?
4. What support do AWWs need to implement NEP 2020 principles effectively?

Methodology:

This study used a qualitative research design rooted in descriptive inquiry. The participants were 35 AWWs from Saltore Panchayat of Neturia Block in Purulia district, West Bengal. The area was chosen due to its tribal composition, limited infrastructure, and high dependency on ICDS services (UNICEF & Government of West Bengal, n.d.).

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the local language (Bengali), with each lasting 25–40 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to capture detailed narratives about children's development, parental cooperation, teaching methods, and training received.

Responses were manually transcribed, translated, and coded for thematic analysis. Emerging codes were grouped under broader categories such as "learning regression," "nutrition challenges," and "parental engagement." Ethical approval was secured, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Findings and Data Presentation:

a) Enthusiastic Return of Children

Many AWWs reported increased attendance and enthusiasm among children after reopening. Factors like the return of the cooked meal programme and peer interaction motivated children to return.

"Earlier some parents stayed away. Now, they come on their own. It's surprising." – Participant A

b) Academic and Cognitive Setbacks

There was widespread learning loss. Some children who had earlier progressed in writing or counting had forgotten basic concepts. AWWs noted this across all skill domains (ASER Centre, 2022).

"Some don't know even '1' anymore. It's like starting from scratch." – Participant B

c) Social and Behavioural Regression

Many children forgot basic routines such as greeting teachers, using the toilet independently, or keeping their shoes in place. Social-emotional skills had also diminished (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

"They look scared at times. Earlier they used to play confidently." – Participant C

Figure 3: Regression in FLN Skills Among Children Post-COVID

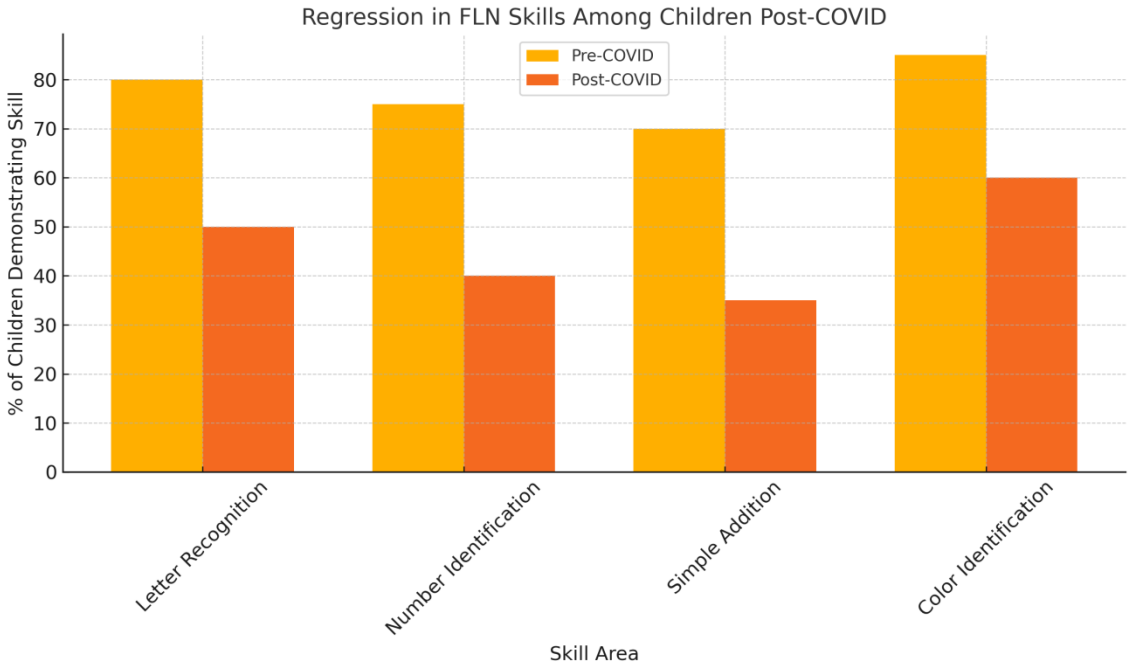


Figure: Comparison of foundational literacy and numeracy skill levels before and after the COVID-19 pandemic among pre-school children.

d) Nutritional Challenges and Health Risks

AWWs observed increased cases of underweight children, with several children falling into the "red zone" category as per Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) measurements.

"We had to refer some to the NRC. Their arm measurements were below normal." – Participant D

e) Interventions During the Pandemic

AWWs shared examples of how they tried to sustain learning through low-tech solutions:

- WhatsApp messages with audio stories
- Paper worksheets handed to mothers

- Home visits in small groups after lockdown eased
- Feedback sessions with mothers to evaluate child progress

These interventions, though thoughtful, could not reach all families due to digital illiteracy and phone-sharing in households (Arias et al., 2019).

f) Challenges in Classroom Management

AWWs expressed difficulty in dealing with children who had aged physically but regressed developmentally. Adapting teaching methods to cater to mixed-readiness groups was a major concern (Pritchett &Sandefur, 2020).

"They are older now, but mentally they are behind. We don't know what to do." – Participant E

Data Tables

Table 1

Regression in FLN Skills Before and After COVID-19

Skill Area	Pre-COVID (%)	Post-COVID (%)
Letter Recognition	80%	50%
Number Identification	75%	40%
Simple Addition	70%	35%
Color Identification	85%	60%

Note. Data reflects AWW perceptions from field-level interactions and informal assessments.

Table 2

Distribution of Key Thematic Challenges Identified by Anganwadi Workers

Theme	No. of Mentions (out of 35)
Nutritional Challenges	32
Academic Regression	34
Social Setbacks	30

Note. Derived from coded interview transcripts.

Figure 4: Key Thematic Challenges Reported by AWWs

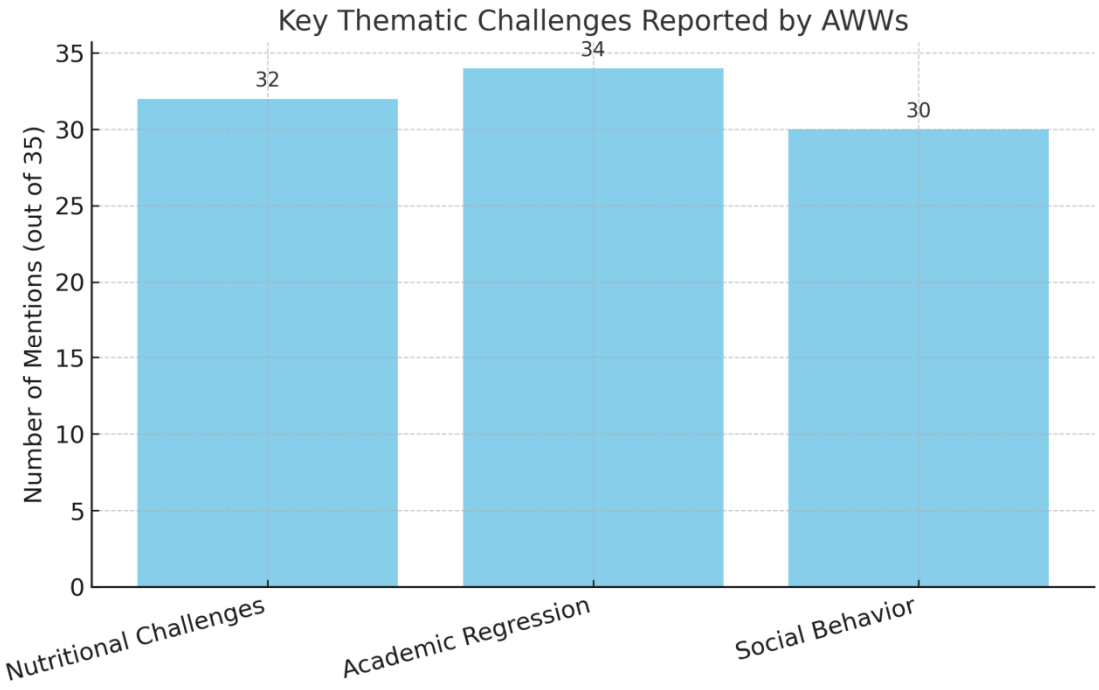


Figure: Distribution of key challenge themes—nutritional, academic, and social—mentioned by Anganwadi Workers during interviews.

Discussion:

The narratives captured in this study reinforce that children's development during COVID-19 was multidimensional. While policymakers have focused on academic recovery, findings suggest the need to address children's nutritional status, emotional well-being, and classroom readiness (Spaull & Taylor, 2015).

Although many AWWs demonstrated creativity, their efforts were hindered by inadequate digital access and lack of structured support. Training initiatives must be contextual, practical, and ongoing (Arias et al., 2019). Parents also need to be made partners in this journey. Strengthening their awareness and engagement is vital to the success of FLN goals.

Recommendations:

1. **Capacity Building:** Frequent, modular, low-cost training sessions on FLN pedagogy and child psychology.
2. **Catch-up Curriculum:** Development of bridge courses for 3–6 year olds combining literacy, numeracy, and social skills.
3. **Community Engagement:** Use village-level forums to educate families about ECCE and school readiness.
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Introduce simple observation-based checklists to monitor FLN progress.

5. **Infrastructure Support:** Upgrade Anganwadi infrastructure to include learning corners, materials, and hygiene facilities.

6. **Incentives and Recognition:** Acknowledge and incentivize innovative AWW efforts to encourage motivation.

Conclusion:

This research shows that AWWs are doing commendable work under difficult circumstances. However, achieving NEP 2020's ambitious goals will require better integration between policy vision and implementation mechanisms. While learning loss is real, it is reversible with timely, targeted, and community-supported interventions. We must shift from policy intention to field-level action.

With the right support, Anganwadi Centres can serve not only as feeders into the school system but as foundational institutions in their own right—nurturing children holistically and laying the true groundwork for lifelong learning.

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