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## **Pedagogy, Resources and Parental Choices in Preschools Education: Comparative Study of Anganwadi Centres and Private Preschools**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Anganwadi Centres and private preschools, two significant models of early childhood education in India. Anganwadi Centres, part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, aim to provide holistic services, including health, nutrition, and early education, primarily to children from underprivileged backgrounds. These centres are crucial for promoting inclusive development but face challenges like limited infrastructure, inadequate resources, and lower teacher-to-student ratios, which can affect the quality of education. The main objective of this research is to evaluate the curriculum and pedagogical approaches of Anganwadi centres and private schools and to analyse the impacts of these institutions on child developmental outcomes indicator.

This research employs a qualitative methodology, using interviews, and observational studies across a representative sample of institutions in Parvati, Pune, to examine the structural, curricular, and pedagogical differences between Anganwadi Centres and private preschools. For this purpose, 4 Anganwadi centre and 4 private preschools were taken as samples.

The findings reveal significant disparities in curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Anganwadi Centres emphasize inclusivity and community involvement, while private preschools focus on academic preparation and individualized attention. The paper concludes by recommending a balanced approach that combines the strengths of both models, integrating the inclusive nature of Anganwadi Centres with the high-quality educational practices of private preschools to ensure equitable and effective early childhood education.

**Key Words:** Childhood Education, Private Preschools, Comparative Analysis, Anganwadi Centres

### **Introduction**

Education is the foundation of national development, and as Nelson Mandela rightly stated, the collapse of education ultimately leads to the collapse of a nation. The early years of life, especially from birth to the age of five, are crucial in shaping a child's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Research across the world confirms that early childhood care and education (ECCE) play a decisive role in determining lifelong learning outcomes and overall well-being. As Maria Montessori emphasized, children represent the hope and promise of humanity, and investing in them is both a moral and developmental necessity.

Globally, early childhood education has gained importance as a strategic priority for building human capital and reducing inequality. Economist James Heckman demonstrated that the highest returns in human capital investment come from investing in children at the earliest stages, particularly among disadvantaged communities. Reflecting this global consensus, the United Nations included early childhood development under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality pre-primary education for all children. Despite such commitments, millions of children in low- and middle-income countries continue to lack access to quality early learning opportunities due to poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate infrastructure.

In the Indian context, the significance of ECCE becomes even more pronounced due to the country's vast child population. India has more than 158 million children below the age of six, making early childhood education a critical area of social policy. The ECCE system in India primarily operates through two parallel models: government-run Anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and privately managed preschools, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas. While Anganwadi centres aim to provide inclusive and accessible services, they often face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and insufficient training. On the other hand, private preschools are perceived as better in quality and English-medium instruction but are expensive, poorly regulated, and sometimes focus more on academic preparation than holistic development. The National Education Policy 2020 recognizes these challenges and emphasizes play-based, activity-based, and child-centered learning across both sectors.

The situation in Maharashtra, especially in urban centres like Mumbai and Pune, further highlights these disparities. Although urban areas are assumed to have better access to educational facilities, many Anganwadi centres in slum and low-income areas lack adequate space, sanitation, and child-friendly infrastructure.

In this context, the present study titled "*Pedagogy, Resources and Parental Choices in Preschool Education: A Comparative Study of Anganwadi Centres and Private Preschools*" seeks to examine the structural, pedagogical, and social differences between these two models. By comparing infrastructure, curriculum practices, teacher training, and parental perceptions, the research aims to generate evidence-based insights to improve equity and quality in early childhood education. Since early education is not merely a private family concern but a public good with long-term social consequences, strengthening ECCE systems is essential for ensuring social justice, human development, and national progress.

### Literature Review

Considering the increasing importance of preschool education many scholars have focused on preschool education as a topic of the research. Mostly it finds that research on preschool education is concentrated on:

Curriculum and pedagogy form the cornerstone of Early Childhood Education (ECE), profoundly influencing a child's developmental trajectory. Anganwadi centres primarily adhere to a holistic, play-based pedagogical model that integrates cognitive, physical, social, and emotional

development. This approach aligns with the objectives outlined in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Training Module developed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2017). The module, designed in collaboration with UNICEF and Ambedkar University, advocates for activity-based learning strategies tailored to the developmental needs of children aged 3–6 years. However, this ideal is often far from reality. Studies such as that by **Majhi and Patnaik (2024)** reveal that in districts like Nua pada, Odisha, there is a severe lack of curriculum standardization and pedagogical consistency across Anganwadi centres. The researchers noted that Anganwadi workers, often burdened with administrative tasks and community health responsibilities, struggle to deliver structured learning sessions. As a result, the educational component of ICDS sometimes becomes secondary to its nutritional and health services. This lack of coherence and standardization in teaching practices results in uneven educational quality and limits the developmental potential of enrolled children. In contrast, private preschools tend to implement more structured and academically oriented curricula. As **Kaul and Sood (2022)** point out, private institutions in both urban and semi-urban settings frequently outperform Anganwadi centres in academic preparedness, largely due to their focused curriculum and better teacher to-child ratios.

Yet, the private sector's academic advantage comes with its own limitations. **Anderson and Mehta (2020)** critique the private preschool model for its limited focus on socio-emotional and cultural development. **Gupta and Thompson (2021)** explore the economic dimension of this challenge. They argue that targeted investments in teacher training especially within the public sector can yield significant returns in terms of child development outcomes and long-term societal benefits. Their research shows that trained teachers are more effective in classroom management, curriculum delivery, and individualized child assessment. Importantly, these benefits extend beyond educational attainment to include better health, social behaviour, and even economic productivity in adulthood.

**Malik et al. (2015)**, in their assessment of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in the Northeast District of Delhi, highlight significant deficiencies in basic infrastructure. These include the lack of proper sanitation, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient ventilation, and the absence of essential educational resources such as blackboards, learning charts, and toys.

**Sharma and Patel (2021)** argue that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds predominantly prefer private preschools for their children. Their preference is anchored in a perception of academic superiority, better teacher credentials, structured curricula, and modern infrastructure. Private preschools are seen not only as educational institutions but as gateways to elite primary schools, shaping the trajectory of children's academic futures.

The expanding body of work on early childhood education in India, **significant gaps** remain in the comparative evaluation of Anganwadi centres and private preschools, particularly through localized and empirically grounded research. One of the foremost gaps is the absence of context-specific assessments of curriculum and pedagogical practices. Another notable gap lies in the limited intersectional analysis of institutional challenges, particularly those related to

infrastructure, resource allocation, and service accessibility. A third research gap pertains to the underrepresentation of parental perspectives in early childhood education discourse.

### Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a **constructivist ontological position**, acknowledging that reality is not objective and fixed, but rather socially constructed through human experience and interaction. Educational systems such as Anganwadi centres and private preschools do not exist as neutral institutions; instead, they are shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. In India, especially in the wake of post-1991 economic reforms. From an **epistemological standpoint**, this study is grounded in interpretivism. Knowledge is seen not as something that exists independently in the world but as something that is co-created through social processes.

In line with these philosophical foundations, the research employs a **qualitative methodology**. This approach enables deep exploration of human experiences, motivations, and institutional contexts. For participant selection, purposive sampling has been employed. This sampling strategy is not aimed at statistical generalization but at ensuring that the most relevant and information-rich cases are selected. The study focuses on three Anganwadi centres and three private preschools located within the **Parvati, Pune**. This locale is chosen to maintain environmental consistency while allowing institutional differences to emerge.

Selection criteria include variation in infrastructure quality, community engagement, and the socio-economic composition of enrolled children. This sampling provides a comparative frame that balances diversity and coherence. Four teachers from Anganwadi centres and Four from private preschools are selected based on their experience and involvement in curriculum planning and classroom instruction. In addition, ten parents are included five whose children attend Anganwadi centres and five whose children attend private preschools. The data collection method consists of in-depth Unstructured interviews, which are well-suited to exploratory qualitative research. Interviews are conducted individually with the six teachers and ten parents.

**Ethical considerations** are strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. For data analysis, the study employs Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### Objectives

- 1) To evaluate the curriculum and pedagogical approaches of Anganwadi Centres and private Preschools.
- 2) To analyse the institutional challenges, resource allocation, and accessibility of Anganwadi centres and private preschools.
- 3) To assess the parental perceptions and preferences regarding the Anganwadi centres and private preschools.

### Research Questions

- 1) What are the key differences in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches between Anganwadi centres and private preschools?
- 2) What institutional challenges, including staffing, infrastructure, and funding, do Anganwadi centres and private preschools face in delivering early childhood education?

3) What are parents' perceptions and preferences regarding the availability of resources, quality, affordability, and effectiveness of services offered by Anganwadi centres versus private preschools?

### Theoretical Framework

**Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework** offers robust analytical tools for examining educational institutions as sites where various forms of capital intersect with social reproduction. His conceptualization of different forms of capital economic, cultural, social, and symbolic provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the comparative dimensions of Anganwadi centres and private preschools (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1984) posits that educational institutions function as mechanisms for reproducing social class structures. In the context of Indian early childhood education, this perspective becomes particularly illuminating when examining the divergent trajectories of Anganwadi centres, which emerged from welfare-oriented policies, and private preschools, which proliferated in response to market liberalization.

1. Economic capital: material resources and financial assets—directly influences the infrastructure, teaching materials, and human resources available to each institution type. Private preschools, operating within market principles introduced by LPG reforms, typically accumulate greater economic capital through fee structures that simultaneously serve as barriers to entry for lower-income families (Bourdieu, 1986).

2. Cultural capital: knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that provide higher status in society manifests distinctly in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Private preschools often emphasize cultural capital aligned with globalized educational standards, including English language instruction and technology integration, elements that Bourdieu would identify as having high "exchange value" in liberalized economic contexts (Bourdieu, 1984).

3. Social capital: networks and relationships that provide institutional support—differs substantially between these institutions. Anganwadi centres typically embed within community structures and state apparatus, while private preschools cultivate networks among middle and upper-class communities, creating what Bourdieu terms "durable networks of relationships" that become institutionalized through market recognition (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu's concept of "field" provides another valuable analytical tool. Fields are structured spaces organized around specific types of capital, where agents compete for resources and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993). Post-LPG reforms transformed early childhood education into a contested field where traditional welfare approaches (Anganwadi's) and market-oriented institutions (private preschools) compete for legitimacy.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus internalized dispositions that guide perceptions and actions—provides insights into parental decision-making regarding early childhood education. Habitus functions as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72), shaping how parents evaluate educational options based on their social position. Also, the analysis draws upon **Fraser's (2009) concept of "participatory parity,"** interrogating whether India's current ECE landscape provides equitable developmental foundations regardless of socioeconomic background. Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides

powerful analytical tools for examining the comparative dimensions of Anganwadi centres and private preschools in India. By employing concepts of capital, field, habitus, symbolic inequalities, and institutional reflexivity, this framework enables systematic analysis of how economic reforms restructured early childhood education through market mechanisms that simultaneously transformed institutional resources, pedagogical legitimacy, and parental preferences.

### **Pedagogy, Resources and Parents choices: A Comparative Analysis**

This research examines five interconnected dimensions across both systems. The analysis draws upon Fraser's (2009) concept of "participatory parity," interrogating whether India's current ECE landscape provides equitable developmental foundations regardless of socioeconomic background. As Appadurai (2004) suggests, educational institutions critically shape children's "capacity to aspire"—their ability to navigate pathways toward desired futures. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing what hooks (1994) terms "education as the practice of freedom"—learning environments that liberate rather than constrain children's potential, regardless of their birth circumstances.

#### **1. Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches**

The Anganwadi model largely adheres to a play-based, child-centric approach rooted in local culture. Anganwadi workers consistently emphasize methods like storytelling, singing, drawing, and celebrating traditional festivals as integral parts of daily education. In sharp contrast, private preschools adopt a highly structured, academic-centric curriculum, frequently modelled on global educational frameworks such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Kindergarten systems. The contrast between Anganwadi centres and private preschools in India is not merely a difference in curriculum design but a manifestation of broader socio-economic inequalities and competing visions of childhood.

#### **2. Teacher Training and Professional Development**

Private preschools, particularly those in urban and semi-urban areas, typically demand higher formal qualifications from their teachers. As a private preschool teacher interviewed explained: "Most teachers are B.Sc., B.Ed., M.Sc. We attend training seminars roughly twice a year". In sharp contrast, Anganwadi workers typically enter service with minimal formal training. Historically, eligibility criteria were modest—completion of the 10th grade sufficed for appointment as a helper, and only slightly higher qualifications were needed for the position of a worker. One Anganwadi worker described: "When we joined, even those who passed 10th grade could become helpers. Now, even though qualifications have increased, the field conditions remain poor". In conclusion, teacher training and professional development in Indian early childhood education reveal a deeply unequal pedagogical landscape.

#### **3. Institutional Challenges: Infrastructure, Resource Allocation, and Accessibility**

The field interviews highlighted the precarious infrastructural realities at Anganwadi centres. One worker stated: "Our centre is rented. No extra funding for repairs. If something breaks, sometimes we pay from our pocket". Another elaborated: "We run classes in a temple because there's no separate building for us". Such testimonies are not isolated incidents but reflect a

systemic pattern. According to Malik et al. (2015), a majority of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in Delhi lacked basic amenities like safe drinking water, functional toilets, sufficient ventilation, and dedicated learning spaces. In stark contrast, private preschools present a picture of resource abundance. One private preschool teacher noted: "We have a play area, well-maintained classrooms, and learning materials like animal cards and freehand boards". This observation reflects broader trends.

#### **4. Systemic and Policy Challenges**

Field data collected through interviews highlights the widespread frustrations among Anganwadi workers regarding their treatment, resources, and workload. One worker emphasized: "We get honorarium, not salaries. Many times, we have to protest for basic pay increases". Another added: "Along with teaching, we have to handle extra administrative tasks like digital KYC updating and mobile data entry". These voices reflect broader systemic inefficiencies and policy implementation gaps, as also extensively discussed in academic research. While private preschools boast structured routines and prepared learning materials,

#### **5. Parental perception**

One respondent who chose an Anganwadi centre explained that proximity and affordability were the deciding factors: "Location, it should be close to home. And fees too... the private school nearby is too far from my house". This reflects the daily lived reality for many working-class families, where convenience and cost-efficiency outweigh other concerns. In contrast, another respondent described opting for a private preschool despite the financial strain, citing quality as the primary motivator: "First of all, the quality—quality of private pre-primary facilities. They are up to the mark compared to public facilities" (Interview 2). This decision illustrates the aspirational value attached to private schooling. This cost-quality dilemma becomes particularly evident when comparing expenses. One respondent pointed out, "Anganwadi charges only ₹300 for the uniform... private school fees are ₹40,000."

For parents Anganwadi centres are appreciated for their "activity-based learning," which includes "storytelling, songs, visuals, and music-based learning." Respondent notes that "they teach through actual experiences". Parents critique of teacher overload in Anganwadi's and her belief that "the quality of education is definitely better in private preschools" is also borne out in Singh's (2023) comparative study.

The comparative examination of Anganwadi centres and private preschools reveals that India's early childhood education landscape remains deeply fragmented along socioeconomic lines. While Anganwadi's offer culturally embedded, inclusive environments that potentially support holistic development, they are systematically undermined by resource deficiencies, inadequate teacher preparation, and bureaucratic overload (Shrivastava et al., 2014). Private preschools, though providing superior infrastructural conditions and academic 45 preparation, often alienate children from their socio-cultural contexts through premature formalization and Western pedagogical models (Anderson & Mehta, 2020).

### **Findings and Discussion**

The research on India's early childhood education landscape reveals a pronounced dichotomy between state-sponsored Anganwadi centres and private preschools. Six core findings demonstrate how this institutional bifurcation shapes children's developmental trajectories through divergent pedagogical philosophies, unequal resource allocation, disparate teacher professionalization, administrative constraints, socioeconomically determined parental choices, and varying models of institutional trust. Together, these factors create a stratified educational system that distributes developmental opportunities unequally, establishing patterns of advantage and disadvantage before formal schooling even begins.

### **1. Divergent Pedagogical Philosophies Perpetuate Educational Stratification**

The fundamental pedagogical approaches between Anganwadi centres and private preschools represent two distinct educational paradigms that directly impact children's developmental trajectories. Anganwadi centres predominantly implement a play-based, culturally-rooted approach that emphasizes sensory learning, storytelling, and community-based activities. This approach aligns with developmental psychology principles that recognize the importance of contextualized learning and socio-emotional development in early childhood. The theoretical basis for this approach draws from sociocultural learning theories, which posit that children construct knowledge through interactions embedded in their cultural context.

In contrast, private preschools adopt structured, academic-centric curricula often modelled on imported educational frameworks (Montessori, Reggio Emilia). They prioritize early literacy, numeracy, and English language acquisition through formal instruction.

### **Systemic Resource Disparities Create Structural Barriers to Quality Education**

The stark contrast in infrastructural capabilities between Anganwadi centres and private preschools reveals a structural inequity that transcends mere operational differences. Anganwadi centres face critical resource constraints including inadequate physical spaces (often operating in temples, rented rooms, or shared facilities), lack of dedicated learning materials, insufficient sanitation facilities, and minimal investment in maintenance or upgrades. These constraints are not incidental but reflect systemic underfunding and neglect of public early childhood infrastructure. Private preschools, operating on fee-based models, generally maintain superior physical environments with dedicated classrooms, play areas, learning materials, and appropriate child-sized furniture. The market-driven nature of these institutions ensures continuous investment in physical infrastructure as a competitive advantage.

This resource gap represents a form of structural violence against marginalized communities, where the quality of early educational environments is determined by family income rather than educational need.

### **2. Professional Development Disparities Reinforce Quality Gaps**

The preparation and professionalization of early childhood educators reveal significant disparities that directly impact educational quality and outcomes. Private preschool teachers typically possess higher formal qualifications (often B.Ed., M.Sc. degrees) and receive regular professional development through seminars and training sessions. This professionalization creates a workforce equipped to implement structured curricula and modern pedagogical

techniques, reinforcing institutional quality advantages. Anganwadi workers, despite recent nominal increases in qualification requirements, receive minimal professional preparation and irregular training opportunities. The classification of these workers as "honorarium-based volunteers" rather than professional educators fundamentally undermines their status, compensation, and access to continuous professional development. This disparity in teacher preparation constitutes a form of professional stratification that directly impacts educational quality.

### **3. Administrative Overload Undermines Educational Mission**

The operational realities of Anganwadi centres reveal a systemic tension between administrative functions and educational purposes that fundamentally compromises their effectiveness. Anganwadi workers must manage an expanding range of non-educational responsibilities including data collection, digital record-keeping, household surveys, nutrition monitoring, immunization tracking, and community mobilization. This administrative burden frequently overshadows their core educational function, leaving minimal time for pedagogical planning, child engagement, or educational innovation. This phenomenon represents what organizational theory identifies as "mission drift" - where the proliferation of bureaucratic requirements distorts the fundamental purpose of an institution. The diversion of worker attention and energy from education to administration creates a functional gap between policy intent and implementation reality.

### **4. Parental Decision-Making Reflects Constrained Choice Architecture**

Parental selection between Anganwadi centres and private preschools reveals complex decision processes shaped more by structural constraints than by free educational preference. For economically disadvantaged families, proximity and affordability dictate institutional selection, with Anganwadi's representing the only viable option despite perceived quality concerns. The substantial cost differential (₹300 for Anganwadi uniform vs. ₹40,000 for private school fees) creates an effective barrier to choice for lower-income families. Families with greater economic resources often select private institutions despite financial strain, driven by perceptions of quality and aspirations for their children's future mobility.

The findings reveal that the current early childhood education landscape in India creates a differential capabilities environment based on socioeconomic positioning. Children attending well-resourced private preschools develop capabilities related to academic preparation, English language proficiency, and socialization into formal educational structures. Children in Anganwadi centres potentially develop capabilities related to cultural embeddedness and community connection but face constraints in developing capabilities valued by formal education systems.

The analysis of the six core findings reveals that India's early childhood education landscape operates as a stratified system that distributes developmental opportunities unequally along socioeconomic lines. The bifurcation between Anganwadi centres and private preschools creates not just different educational experiences but fundamentally different capabilities trajectories for young children. Addressing these structural inequities requires moving beyond

incremental improvements to fundamental system redesign that centres children's capabilities development regardless of socioeconomic positioning. Only through such transformation can early childhood education fulfil its promise as a foundation for social justice and equal opportunity.

### Conclusion

The analysis of Anganwadi centres and private preschools in India reveals a deeply stratified early childhood education landscape that both reflects and reinforces broader social inequalities. Drawing from these findings, we propose a theoretical framework for understanding early childhood education as a mechanism of social reproduction in the post-colonial context.

This theory, which we term "**Educational Stratification and Social Reproduction Theory**," posits that early childhood education systems in developing contexts like India operate as powerful sorting mechanisms that channel children into differentiated educational trajectories based primarily on their socioeconomic backgrounds rather than their inherent abilities or potential. This stratification occurs through three interrelated processes:

1. **Structural Bifurcation:** The institutional separation between resource-poor public systems (Anganwadi's) and resource-rich private systems creates what Bourdieu (1986) would describe as differentiated "fields" of early education, each with distinct forms of capital valorisation.
2. **Cultural Valorisation:** Private preschools, with their emphasis on English-medium instruction and international curricula, embody what Krishna Kumar (2005) identifies as a post-colonial preference for Western educational models as signifiers of "progress." This creates a hierarchy where indigenous knowledge systems and culturally embedded pedagogies
3. **Constrained Choice Architecture:** Parents' decisions about early education are heavily constrained by socioeconomic factors, creating an illusion of choice that masks underlying structural inequalities. What appears as parental preference is often the result of severely limited options determined by income, geography, and social capital.

The consequence of these processes is a form of educational stratification that begins before formal schooling and creates what Sen (2009) calls "capability deprivation" among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The practical implications of this theory suggest that reforms focusing solely on improving access or quality within existing institutional structures will be insufficient to address fundamental inequalities. Instead, transformative change would require:

1. Reconceptualizing early childhood education as a universal right rather than a market commodity
2. Integrating the strengths of both systems—the cultural embeddedness and inclusivity of Anganwadi's with the resources and structured pedagogy of private preschools
3. Elevating the status and professionalization of early childhood educators, particularly in the public sector

As the National Education Policy 2020 attempts to integrate preschool education into the formal schooling system, it presents an opportunity to address these structural inequalities. However, without explicit attention to the mechanisms of stratification identified in this theory, such reforms risk reproducing existing hierarchies under new institutional arrangements. To conclude,

the bifurcation between Anganwadi centres and private preschools in India represents more than a divide in educational quality—it embodies a profound social justice issue where the promise of equal opportunity is systematically undermined from life's earliest stages.

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