

Challenges in Implementing the Thematic Calendar in Anganwadis of Kerala: Perspectives of Anganwadi Workers

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Abstract

In the context of the thematic calendar, a curriculum for early years has been introduced by Integrated Child Development Services with the objective of holistic development of the children of 3-6 years. This study explores the challenges faced by the Anganwadi workers in implementing the thematic calendar. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty 30 Anganwadi workers who were selected randomly from Kozhikode urban and rural projects of ICDS in Kerala. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview responses. It was found that challenges in implementing the curriculum in Anganwadis relates to enrolment, learning aids, teaching-learning practices, infrastructure and logistic facilities, other services, financial assistance, supervision and training and honorarium. Measures to overcome the challenges and improve the practices of Anganwadi workers are suggested.

Keywords: Anganwadi centre, ICDS, Preschool education, Preschool Curriculum

Introduction

The importance of early years is well-recognised in various international and national policy documents. Many studies have established the impact of this critical period in the later life of children. The appropriate investments in the physical, cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional development from birth to primary school years are critical for the success in school and beyond. The National Policy for Children 1974 acknowledged children as 'supremely important assets' of the nation and suggested the State governments have to provide adequate services for children to ensure development in all aspects. To accomplish this purpose, Integrated Child Development

Service, one of the world's largest and distinctive outreach programmes for early childhood care and development, was launched on 2 October 1975. The ICDS is India's response to the challenge of meeting the holistic needs of the child and represents India's commitment to its children. In the initial stages, ICDS was implemented in 33 selected community development blocks with 4,891 anganwadi centres (AWCs) all over India. At present, the ICDS is a network of around 14 lakh approved AWCs /mini-AWCs in the country, of which more than 13 lakh are functional (National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development Report, 2017). The six services provided under the ICDS are: supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health checkup, referral

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services, nutrition and health education, and preschool education for children of 3-6 years.

In Kerala, ICDS was launched as a pilot project at Vengara, one of the districts in Malappuram. After nearly 45 years of operation in the state, the ICDS has developed into a vast network of providing various services to children aged 0-6 years, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women in all districts across the state. At present, there are 32,986 anganwadis and 129 mini anganwadis in Kerala. An anganwadi centre is run by an anganwadi worker (AWW) and supported by a helper. AWWs, the community-based voluntary functionaries of the ICDS programme (Thakare et al., 2011) have close and continuous contact with the different groups of beneficiaries under ICDS. Due to the various job responsibilities, these honorary AWWs have a pivotal role in the proper functioning of the centres.

Recognising the importance of the preschool years, a curriculum called thematic calendar (Government of Kerala, 2014-15) was introduced in the ICDS for physical-motor, social-emotional, language, cognitive and creative-aesthetic development of the child. It includes the basic concepts of Malayalam, Mathematics, Environmental Studies and General Knowledge and helps to develop the language and early literacy capabilities in Malayalam language. These concepts and subjects are taught through 30 themes such as child and family, my body, rain and seasons, fruits, vegetables, festivals, important days, etc. Thematic calendar introduces two or three themes per month through vivid activities for different age groups of 3+, 4+ and 5+ years' children.

Need and significance

Considering the significance of early years in development, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 targets at achieving universal provision of quality early childhood care and education by 2030 and ascertaining school readiness for Class 1 students. The earlier,

National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 also emphasised that programmes of ECCE would be child-centered focussing on play and individuality of the child and stressed that formal methods and introduction of the 3Rs would be discouraged in this critical period. Moreover, the Programme of Action (POA) of NPE 1986 correlated the significant parameters of the quality of life with ECCE (Mohanthy & Mohanthy 1994).

The National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-06) data (IIPS, 2007) shows that though anganwadi centres are increasing, the status of children in the country is still far from what is expected. Literature shows that even though the preschool education component of ICDS scheme is decisive in child development, this service fails to achieve its objectives due to various reasons. One of the major reasons is the different problems faced by the AWWs in the area of implementing preschool education.

Dhingra & Sharma (1969) reported that preschool education activities were being done by the AWWs on a routine basis but the activities were mostly monotonous and lacked newness. Sandhyarani and Rao (2013), Patil and Doibale (2013), Desai, Pandit and Sharma (2012), Madhavi and Singh (2011), and Dongre et al. (2008) reported that most of the AWWs complained about excessive workload. AWWs are very poorly paid (Bhatnagar & Bhadra 2017; Patil & Doibale 2013) and are stressed and dissatisfied (Aswathy & Pillai 2017; Bhatnagar & Bhadra 2017). The few studies available regarding preschool aspects and problems of AWWs in Kerala indicate that local bodies assigned the anganwadi staff indiscriminately for other duties (Seema 2001) and that anganwadi services for children are under-utilised (Francis & Paul 2017), with the latter also stressing the need to carry out qualitative studies to trace reasons thereof. NIPCCD Report (2020) also recommended that work assigned to AWWs need to be reviewed keeping in view the extreme pressure on AWWs.

In this context, the present study assumes significance and explores the challenges faced by the AWWs in implementing the thematic calendar. The study will be constructive not only to the policymakers and officials but also to the stakeholders of anganwadis to cognize the difficulties of AWWs and to prepare training strategies for making the programme more effective and create appropriate organisational atmosphere to improve practices of AWWs.

Objectives

1. To find out the challenges faced by the anganwadi workers in implementing the thematic calendar.
2. To suggest measures to overcome the challenges faced by the anganwadi workers in implementing thematic calendar and improve the preschool education practices of anganwadi workers.

Methodology

Sample: The study was conducted among 30 anganwadi workers selected from anganwadi workers of Kozhikode urban and rural projects of ICDS in Kerala.

Tools: Semi-structured interviews were conducted by visiting the select AWWs to identify the challenges faced by the anganwadi workers in implementing thematic calendar. These interview schedules were validated by three subject experts and modified based on their suggestions prior to being used for data collection.

Analysis: Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was used to organise data and identify patterns called 'themes'. The following themes were derived from the analysis: enrolment, learning aids, teaching-learning practices, infrastructural and logistical facilities, other services, financial assistance, supervision and training, and honorarium. First, all interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. Second, the transcripts were coded by annotating with initial codes that briefly

described the text. The codes were reviewed, which meant renaming or combining repetitive ones. Third, the codes were ranked and some codes were made subordinate codes. The codes with their subordinate codes were grouped into themes, which were derived based on the study's research question. Fourth, the coded text extracts relevant to each theme and sub-theme were re-read to ensure consistency within each and distinctiveness between them. If there was inconsistency, the code and related subordinate codes were moved to a more appropriate initial theme and sub-theme or merged. From this process, the groupings were finalised. Fifth, theme and sub-themes were renamed and defined to accurately and succinctly represent the data contained. The sixth step was reporting.

Findings: The challenges faced by the AWWs in implementing the thematic calendar are given in detail under different themes.

I. Enrolment and attendance

- i. Number of children: Some of the AWCs have around 30 children and even more in the densely populated areas. Considering the multi-age group to which these students belongs, AWWs report that it is difficult for them to engage all the children when the number of children increase.
- ii. Different age group: An anganwadi centre has children of different age groups (3-6 years). Though they are supposed to manage multi-age groups, AWWs are not trained well. The lack of training causes difficulties in conducting various activities, which are prescribed in the thematic calendar for the different age groups at a time.
- iii. Two sessions of admission in a year: ICDS promotes admission in June and November. According to the anganwadi workers, the admission in November affects the smooth conduct of the preschool activities as the thematic calendar is prepared based on many factors. One among them is seasons. The

children who get admission in November may miss the themes and activities during June session. Moreover, many of them do not complete even a year, which makes it difficult for the teachers to implement the thematic calendar properly.

- iv. High absenteeism and unpunctuality: Majority of the AWWs complain that irregular attendance and late coming are major issues. Though the anganwadi functioning hours is from 10 am to 3 pm, most of the children come too late and many of them attend irregularly. This, according to AWWs, is because parents do not consider attending anganwadi classes as an important one. However, it is difficult to attribute a cause effect relationship between implementing the thematic calendar and absenteeism because it can be the other way around too. Students may be finding the curriculum uninteresting and may be demotivated due to the unimaginative transaction as well.
- v. Dropout: The activities in the thematic calendar are for the children of 3-6 years group. Most of the parents consider AWCs as a preparatory centre and after six months or one year of admission, children are transferred to other types of preschools. Only a few children complete three years of preschool education in anganwadis and enroll directly to Class 1. So the AWWs cannot implement all the themes and activities prescribed in the thematic calendar.
- vi. Special children: Aiming for quality education for all children without discrimination, Kerala Social Security Mission and State Initiative on Disabilities commenced a pilot project 'Special anganwadis' in Kozhikode district in 2016. Twenty three AWCs were selected as special anganwadis from 21 ICDS blocks and appointed special trainers. It is not a separate institution for differently abled children only, it is an inclusive system. As the number of special anganwadis is few, it is difficult

for the children in remote areas to reach a particular centre. Only special trainers properly deal with the disabled children. Owing to lack of proper training AWWs spend more time with these children, which affects the implementation of the thematic calendar.

II. Learning aids

- i. Workbook and handbook: The Social Justice Department introduced *Anganapoomazha* (Government of Kerala, 2014-15), an activity-oriented workbook containing 30 themes, which has not been provided to all anganwadi children yet. Some of the anganwadis do not have the teacher's handbook *Anganathaimavu* (Government of Kerala, 2014-15), which includes a detailed description of vivid activities of 30 themes with age-specific guidelines.
- ii. Preschool kit: The technical committee of the ICDS has prepared a list for preschool kit that includes 40 necessary learning aids and play materials like blocks, beads, colours, pictures, flashcards, puzzles, storybooks, etc. Most of the anganwadis do not have learning materials in the list, which is essential to conduct various activities prescribed in the thematic calendar. Those who have some aids, most of them are old and damaged.

III. Teaching-learning practices

- i. Number and difficulty of activities: The thematic calendar (Government of Kerala 2014-15) and teachers' handbook (*Anganathaimavu*) introduces many themes and specifies various activities for each theme. While most of the AWWs opined that the number of activities in the thematic calendar is more and it is difficult to complete them within the stipulated time, some pointed out that a few of the activities introduced were too difficult for the children to follow.
- ii. Introducing the English language: Some of the AWWs opined that though ICDS never promotes languages other than

the mother tongue, English has been introduced due to the compulsion of parents. Hence, it becomes a hindrance to the proper implementation of the thematic calendar. But the majority of the AWWs suggested introducing English in AWCs.

IV. Infrastructure and logistic facilities

- i. Indoor space: Though the majority of the anganwadis are working either in their building or in the school building, most of them have only a single room for playing, learning, dining, sleeping, cooking and storing. Thus, children do not get enough space to move freely while performing activities. A worker exclaimed, 'How can the activities in the calendar be implemented in a congested room!' Only a few AWCs have aesthetically attractive and child-friendly infrastructure.
- ii. Outdoor space: A majority of the anganwadis do not have outdoor space for play, which is vital for the enjoyment of childhood as well as social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.
- iii. Inadequate furniture: A few anganwadis do not have proper furniture like chair, table, cupboard, etc. Also the furniture in most anganwadis is not maintained properly.
- iv. Inappropriate ventilation and lack of electricity and water: Some of the anganwadis do not have proper ventilation and electricity. Most of the anganwadis depend on wells and taps in the neighbourhood.

V. Other services

- i. Various surveys, registers and reports: There are different types of surveys the anganwadi workers have to conduct after anganwadi time (3.30-4.30 pm). The details of the survey were entered manually in various registers till recently. In August 2019, ICDS introduced an application, 'Common Application Software' (ICDSCAS) and provided a mobile hand-set to feed all the

information regarding surveys except the stock register. Some of the AWWs said that it is a herculean task and they have to devote considerable amount of time for uploading data on their mobile phones because many of them are unable to handle it. It affects the preparation for the preschool teaching and resulted in inefficiency of ECCE. Also, the ICDSCAS does not have any component of ECCE, which has resulted in the AWWs not giving ECCE a priority anymore. ECCE seems to have been relegated to the background.

Moreover, anganwadi workers have to submit a comprehensive AWC Monthly Progress Report (AMPR) to their supervisors on the first working day of the month, which includes details of births, deaths and new registrations during the month, supplementary nutrition coverage, preschool education coverage, nutritional status of children, immunisation coverage, Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND) activities summary and referral services. Hence, they cannot dedicate the preschool time properly.

- ii. Various meetings and classes / community-based events (CBE): AWWs organise various community-based events such as mother's meeting, Seemantha Sangamam (for pregnant women), Varna Sangamam (for adolescents), Dhampathi Sangamam (for couples), Kunjoonu (for children after six months), Nirmalsangamam" (for all category of people about health and sanitation), meeting for older adults, nutrition and health education, coordinate immunisation camps and health check-up camps, and Anganwadi Level Monitoring Supporting Committee. Most of the AWWs reported that it disturbs the preschool time. From another perspective, though, this scenario also implies that teachers need to perceive the development of children under their care as the most important duties, which

should not be compromised for the sake of other responsibilities.

VI. Financial assistance

- i. Delay in funds: National Nutrition Mission provides funds as well as Central government grants Rs. 5,000 per anganwadi to purchase a preschool kit, which includes workbook of anganwadi children, progress report, certificate and teaching aids, Rs. 1,000 for medicine kit and Rs. 2,000 as a contingency. A few AWWs opined that the delay in granting the funds affects the proper functioning of AWCs.

VII. Supervision and training

- i. Insufficient training: Induction Training (on appointment) mainly to AWWs, Job Training (once during service period) and Refresher Training (once in every two years), are the three types of training for AWWs. But some of the workers, not content with the current training practices are demanding more comprehensive training to implement the thematic calendar.
- ii. Inadequate instructions and guidelines: A few AWWs opined that lack of adequate instructions and guidelines from the supervisors and child development project officer (CDPO) is one of the hindrances in the implementation of the thematic calendar. It is revealed that the frequency of visits by the supervisor, child development project officer/assistant child development officer and health staff is irregular.

VIII. Honorarium

- i. Unsatisfactory honorarium: The honorarium for AWWs is Rs. 12,000 per month, which is shared by the centre, state and local body as Rs. 4,500, Rs. 5,300 and Rs. 2,200, respectively. The anganwadi workers are dissatisfied with the meagre amount, especially when comparing it with their endless services and present-day cost of living.

Measures to overcome the challenges in implementing the thematic calendar and improving the practices of anganwadi workers

The essential measures to be adopted are given below with various heads, such as administration, curriculum supports, infrastructure, in-service education, financial assistance, service conditions, and other supports. This will provide a better opportunity for AWWs to implement the thematic calendar appropriately, which in turn, will result in the holistic development of preschool children.

Administration

The admission criteria should be revised regarding the time of admission, age of the children and number of children in an AWC by maintaining the AWW:child ratio of 1:20 for 3-6-year-old children. It is necessary to study the absenteeism factors and adopt adequate strategies for increasing the attendance and completing three years of preschool education. Provision for special anganwadis for differently-abled children in all ICDS projects need to be promoted.

Curriculum supports

The activities in the thematic calendar should be reviewed to make necessary changes according to the need of the children. Ensure adequate and timely distribution and proper utilisation of logistic supplies, especially the essential aids for teaching various themes.

Infrastructure

Child-friendly indoor and outdoor infrastructure facilities with adequate technological devices should be made available. Basic amenities like lighting, drinking water, toilet, etc. should be ensured while introducing new AWCs.

In-service education

Provide comprehensive training to AWWs and helpers on child development and in implementing the thematic calendar in an

interesting and child-centred way. CDPOs/ district level officials should also be trained properly on monitoring the implementation of the thematic calendar.

Financial assistance

Supply of adequate fund in time is essential for the smooth functioning of AWCs. To enhance motivation and self-satisfaction, make necessary increments in the honorarium of AWWs based on their work.

Service conditions

Review the work assigned to the AWWs and reduce the burden of surveys and meetings. It will help AWWs to focus on preschool education and to achieve its objectives.

Other supports

Frequent interactions among AWWs and supervisors should be ensured and adequate directions should be provided to AWWs in imparting the thematic calendar. Public awareness on the significance of early childhood years and non-formal preschool education need to be strengthened and more community participation to support the entire services should be ensured.

Conclusion

Curriculum, the backbone of any education system, has an immense role in the development of children. Many factors – learner, teacher, infrastructure, instructional, and parental factors – are responsible for the improper implementation of the thematic calendar in AWCs and for not achieving the objectives of preschool education. However, this study considered the factors regarding the perspectives of AWWs only and has not taken other perspectives like that of parents, learners, teacher educators of AWWs

and administrators into consideration. Naturally, instead of self-criticism, AWWs may be attributing the major challenges in implementing the thematic calendar to the factors other than those inherently connected to quality, motivation, training, and commitment levels of themselves and highlighting the learner related, familial and systemic factors. The observations herein needs to be read with these limitations of the present study.

Overwork and underpayment are the major hitches they are facing at present in the proper functioning of preschool education. The additional activities apart from their routine work can lead to extreme stress among AWWs. Most of the NIPCCD reports also recommended that work assigned to AWWs need to be reviewed keeping in view the extreme pressure on AWWs. A report published by NITI AYOOG (Government of India) in 2015 revealed that 41 per cent AWCs have either a shortage of space or unsuitable accommodation and only 48.2 per cent of anganwadi centres maintain good hygienic condition. The findings of the study reveal that still there is no improvement in these areas. It is appreciable that realising the importance of preschool education, the Women and Child Development Department is set to construct 210 smart anganwadi centres across the state as the pilot stage, with required infrastructure and focus on the overall development of children. Though it is one of the necessities, only smart anganwadis will not suffice to achieve the objectives of preschool education. Hence, each and every challenge is to be addressed and rectified with necessary steps and innovative strategies to support the development of preschoolers, the most vulnerable group constituting 36 per cent of the total population of India, according to the objectives of the preschool education.

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