



RETHINKING EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN INDIA

Dr Anil Kumar Teotia, Principal, District Institute of Education & Training (SCERT), Dilshad Garden, Delhi,110095, India, anilkrteotia@gmail.com

Abstract- Brain development in the initial years of a child is more crucial, and the impact of early learning is long-lasting. Students, who attend quality preschool, perform better than their counterparts. Pre-school education can be most important for developing a solid base in education on which all the future learning is expected to depend. However, until now, there is no legal provision in India for making preschools mandatory for all. The RTE 2009 was delinked from pre-schooling by creating an age limit of 6-14 years. The latest National Education Policy 2020 is taking more interest in the early years. This prompted the research to examine the current status of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India and the opinions of different policy documents about it; further, a sample of ECCE activities are given for understanding the importance of ECCE and the challenges in the absence of ECCE.

On the one hand, this program makes students ready for school, and on the other hand, it helps improve the learning and understanding of kids. Some suggestions are highlighted to ensure the proper upkeep and development of the programme. The main recommendations include making provisions in the law for teacher training regulation and standards, making a play-based, interactive, meaningful, multi-disciplinary, problem-solving, art-integrated and flexible curriculum, including ECCE under the preview of RTE 2009 etc.

KEYWORDS: ECCE; Pre-school; Anganwadi; Balwatika; RTE 2009; NPE 2020; Childhood; Early years; Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The early years from zero to eight are considered the most crucial part of proper development in various domains. The foundations are always crucial for any future proceedings. The educational foundation refers to the support provided to children before they enter school. Benefits of including and emphasizing the importance of early childhood care and education include better learning outcomes in schools and higher education, improving the social and economic status of the individuals, reduce the dropout rates/failure/repetitions in the same class and also improve learning level at various levels (indirectly).

The focus on early childhood care and education has been more intensified in recent year. The ASER 2019 report was also dedicated to the early years'. The new policies and all the frameworks show a keen interest in the early years now than ever. Several studies in India and abroad have shown that 'brain development in a child's initial years is more crucial. Further, the preparation of kids for school is something which is gaining importance in today's world. In different studies, it was shown that the children who attended preschool perform better in Math and Language than the children who are admitted to schools directly (without preschool).

In light of new information and new findings of brain developments in the initial years of life, many governments in different parts of the world are trying hard to take advantage of these findings. The new reforms are taking place to support the development of kids in the early years. The comprehensive needs and requirements of children are not met at home and local institutions. There is a need to make these things scientific. Having this in mind, India's policymakers included the most demanded something in the national educational reforms, i.e. National Education Policy 2020.

In the present paper, the research tried to examine the current situation of ECCE in India and suggested some ways of improving the curricula and pedagogical practices in Early CCE.

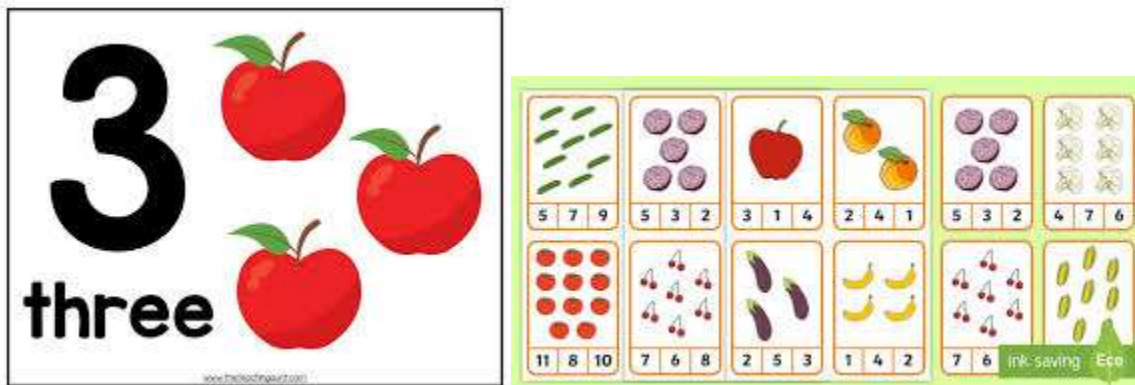
Challenges faced in the absence of ECCE: Benefits of ECCE

Currently, India has more than 15 crores of children between 0-6 years of age and every year, crores of children are admitted to school (class-1). These unprepared schools kids waste many critical months in realizing that a school is a place of learning. I still remember my experiences of class one students admitted directly in class one. *Whenever I went to their class for any purpose, I found them crying at home and asking for rewards for staying in school.* Almost one year is required for making them comfortable in the school's new formal setting; it may result in wastage of some precious time. Pre-schools can help develop emotional control in children and make children prepared mentally and emotionally healthy for school.

Learning 'how to interact is essential for the school setting. In schools, the entire focus is on the development of various linguistic and mathematical concepts and procedures; by the age of 6, ideally, the child should know how to respond in different situations, how to talk in groups with peers, how to respond to teachers through group representation etc. without these kinds of preparation it is challenging for the teachers to accommodate kids in the classroom because these skills are considered as essential to the formal school setting.

"Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. ECCE can nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens."

For the present context, we are taking examples of Mathematics. For the development of number-ness and number sense, it is also advisable to develop pre-number concepts and pre-number vocabulary. The preparatory stage curriculum (pre-school) is designed in inappropriate ways, and some activities are also conducted to create these things. To name a few activities, we have the following results.



ECCE helps in the facilitation of these preparatory stages. The introduction of the topic will determine its impact on the surface of the mind. An expert teacher in pre-school can help children learn a lot and leave a lasting effect on children. ECCE also increases future learning outcomes through the spiral approach. Further, "Studies have looked at everything from the broad social benefits of early childhood education".

An example of the ECCE learning process dealing with foundational numeracy and Mathematical literacy

The teaching and learning of numbers go in different phases, from simply recognizing digits and numbers to using numbers to solve complex problems. The various achievement surveys conducted by multiple agencies report that 'there is a misconception in understanding numbers among children. This is because children do not understand numbers in a real sense. The focus will not be on memorizing numbers through different techniques but on pre-number concepts (taking an example). Pre-number ideas include one to one correspondence, sorting, comparing, ordering, unitizing, seriation etc.

Activities in pre-school will be more integrated and informal than in primary school. For example, the number of bottles required for a given number of kids to water plants in the garden, putting candy in each child's bucket, putting each sock for each shoe etc., for another concept like sorting many different informal activities can be done. For example, they create groups of various plants in the school based on other characteristics, making groups of blocks available for playing. What is expected is to make them feel safe, aware of the activities done, not to pressurize them with content, make them feel comfortable in searching relations with you, play with them (make the plays less structured and less educational, making plays educational may reduce the fun element, and it is the most crucial element at this stage). Let them imagine, play, create, and socialize with others in the school.

II. EFFORTS SO FAR

Constitutional Provisions: Directive Principles

Indian constitution directs the governments for taking appropriate steps for providing free and compulsory education to all the children in India up to the age of 14 years. Moreover, this issue is repeatedly blurted out in various five-year plans (FYPs). The state's directive principles are committed to providing children with quality education without a lower age limit. Hence, pre-school is included in it. According to article 45 of the Indian Constitution, "The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of 6 years". The word endeavour is essentially creating no pressure on the state.

RTE 2009

The goal/promise of providing universal access to primary education was made in 2009 though the 86th amendment of the Indian constitution. The preceding decade has shown considerable improvements in kids' enrollment pattern in primary schools and completion of education up to elementary education. This is because of the Right to Education Act of 2009. However, the most significant mistake/criticism of the act is that 'the act failed to address education at pre-primary level'. Moreover, the government of India smartly delinked ECCE from constitutional commitment. Several activists criticized this act of the Government of India,

According to article 11 of Right to Education 2009 (RTE 2009), governments are requested to promote the ECCE. The act's exact wordings were "to prepare children above the age of 3 years for elementary education....the appropriate government may make necessary arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children". However, no government made any special or landmark provision for its implementation. The RTE 2009 did not make it mandatory for the government to comply; instead, it made a request, and no one approved.

Different Prominent Policy Documents also says many things about ECCE. For example- The National Policy on Education (1986) considers ECCE "an inbuilt input in the Human resource strategy". It considers it a supportive strategy for primary school education and support service for working women. The National Nutrition Policy (1993) recognizes this period of 0-6 years of high risk and demand for the priority. The national curricular framework of 2000 and 2005 consider ECCE an essential tool for the child's all-round development. Finally, the concept and importance of ECCE are echoed in the latest version of national policy for education. The rest of the discussion is about it only.

The New Proposed System of Education (5+3+3+4)

The national education policy proposes a new system of education by criticizing the present system of 10+2. The policy says, 'School education can be modified with a different structure than 10+2 and suggest a new pedagogical and curricular model, i.e. 5+3+3+4. This new system includes the ignored pre-school education in India. In the new system, there will be a foundational stage for 5 years (to be divided further into two-level viz. 3 years for Anganwardi or preschool or Bal Vatika for kids of 3-6 years and 2 years of class 1 & 2), the next stage is a preparatory stage for 3 years (from class 3-5), the third stage is again of 3 years for class 6-8. At last, there is the fourth stage of secondary for class 9-12th.

It is for the first time in India that National Policy recognizes the importance of Early CCE. The reason behind this is the scientific knowledge available for brain development. According to research literature, "over 85% of the child's cumulative brain development occurs before the age of 6". So, time demands to take appropriate care of the brain in the children as earliest as possible. Currently, the early CCE is not available in any part of the nation. Even if it is available, it is of poor quality, and to lower socio-economic kids, the quality is most lacking.

The policy suggests hefty investments in ECCE so that there is universal access to this programme in India. The policy also sets a limit on the time for completion of this mission. 2030 is the last date. Ensuring that all the kids entering schools are ready for school (though ECCE) by 2030 is hard. "Why is it so?" is a question for another research.

Pre-primary or pre-school or early CCE etc., are various names given to the same things. Pre-primary education can be most important for developing a solid base in education on which all the future learning is expected to depend. The pre-school makes each level of education more effective and efficient by providing appropriate support at the beginning.

According to the highlights of the report prepared by ASER through a 5-year longitudinal research study, it was shown that "even one year of participation in the ECCE programme (quality programme) can help children in improving school readiness, and consequently it may lead to better learning outcomes in primary grades".

Suggestions- It is time to start over again; it is time to have fun.

The most critical issues involved in the ECCE are its quality and access. The impact of ECCE is directly related to the quality of ECCE available. Currently, the situation of pre-school is the worst. The teachers/Anganwadi workers are untrained. There are no special provisions in the law for their training and regulation. The availability of necessary learning conditions such as a room and an older person (we are not using the word teacher here deliberately) is insufficient. If we want to make the best of it, we have to make provisions for teacher training regulations and standards. Remember, we require professionally trained teachers in addition to the necessary infrastructure. The *Laissez-Faire* system of regulation and accreditation of training institutes has created this drastic situation of unrecognized waste institutes in society.

Curriculum for Early CCE

The NPE 2020 states that the ECCE programme aims to "attain optimal outcomes in different domains viz. physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy, and numeracy". The pre-primary level curriculum should consist of play-based, interactive, meaningful, multi-disciplinary, problem-solving, art-integrated, and flexible activities. The main focus of ECCE should be clearly defined in the framework that is "development of the all-round personality of the child". It should be recognized that some sections of society will face more difficulty in sending their children to pre-school. A particular gender will be at a disadvantage so that appropriate measures are taken to ensure the setup's inclusivity.

The teaching at the ECCE stage must be informal with informal evaluation. To keep it, informal was also suggested in the National Curriculum Framework of 2000 and 2005. The start should be made to understand the wider gaps between the guidelines issued by NCERT from time to time and ground realities.

Further, the national education policy 2020 is just a guideline, and it is not promised that the appropriate government will follow these guidelines. The policy demands the inclusion of ECCE in the RTE act so that the commitments made in article 45 (endeavour) will become the obligations (mandatory) of the government.

III. CONCLUSION

The foundations are always crucial for any future proceedings. The educational foundation refers to the support provided to children before they enter school. The focus on early childhood care and education has been more intensified in recent year. The new brain development findings urge the governments to take the necessary steps and make arrangements for ECCE. Having this in mind, India's policymakers included the most demanded thing in the national educational reforms, i.e. National Educational Policy 2020, and the present article explores the same thing.

There are numerous benefits of introducing ECCE in the country because pre-schools can help develop children's emotional control and make them mentally and emotionally healthy for school. In short, ECCE makes children ready for school. ECCE also increases future learning outcomes through the spiral approach. Further, "Studies have looked at everything from the broad social benefits of early childhood education". We have also provided an example of sample activities performed in a usual ECCE classroom for developing early numeracy and literacy. Activities in pre-school will be more integrated and informal than in primary school.

Further, some of the significant efforts in the development of ECCE are highlighted until now. Starting from the constitutional provision under directive principles and article 45 to how India's government delinked the ECCE from its commitment to providing education up to 14. In the end, the new National Education Policy 2020 has been discussed concerning ECCE. In the concluding remarks, some suggestions for improvement in early childhood care and education are included.

REFERENCES

1. *Draft National Education Policy, 2019*
https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Draft_NEP_2019_EN_Revised.pdf
2. Kaul, V., & Sankar, D. (2009). Early childhood care and education in India. *Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment. New Delhi, India, National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA)*.
3. GoI [Government of India]. (1949) Constitution of India. New Delhi: Government of India.
4. GoI [Government of India]. (1986) National Policy on Education 1986. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development.
5. GoI. (2007): Early Childhood Education in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) - Sub Group Report. New Delhi: Ministry of Women and Child Development.
6. NCTE. [National Council of Teacher Education]. (2005): Annual Report for the Year 2004-05. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development
7. NCERT. [National Council of Educational Research and Training] (2005b) National Curriculum Framework Review 2005 (Draft). New Delhi: NCERT.
8. NCERT. [National Council of Educational Research and Training]. (1993): Impact of ECE on Retention in Primary Grades – A Longitudinal Study. New Delhi: NCERT.
9. Tuli, M. (2012). Beliefs on parenting and childhood in India. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 43(1), 81-91.