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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The pre-school age is the most impressionable age in one’s life. At no other stage is the child able to benefit as much from a stimulating environment. Children are the future of our nation. It is an urgent need to provide education as an enriching experience and a solid foundation for them. Keeping this in mind, Early Childhood Education assumes importance for the all round development of a child. Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the education that children obtain during the early stages of their childhood, a stage that is crucial in the development of the mental functions of children. This development, including the emergence of the abilities and skills in areas such as language, motor skills, psychosocial cognitive and learning, is now known to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, including the nature of the educational environment to which the child is exposed during the first 6 to 8 years of life. This article describes a brief overview of history, chronicles government initiatives in early childhood education, describes the range of programs available in India and identifies the goals that will shape the future of early childhood education programmes in India.

INTRODUCTION

Children are the future of our nation and even throughout history; they have always enjoyed a special status in society. In India, childhood is considered to be unique and an enjoyable period in an individual’s life. As a result, children are pampered by adults in the family and in the community. Moreover, numerous special occasions in community mark the significance of this development period: whole communities celebrate the birth of a child, a child’s first intake of solid food, the naming ceremony for a child and child’s first day of Formal Education. Informal learning of young children, in the meantime, continues in a natural environment. However, the growing demands of a newly industrialized nation have altered many of the basic children learning practices in India. The pre-school age is the most impressionable age in one’s life: at no other stage is the child able to benefit as much from a stimulating environment. A child's needs at this period are different from those of older school going children, largely because early
childhood sees the greatest growth and development in him, the time when the brain develops most rapidly, almost at its fullest. It is a period when walking, talking, self-esteem, vision of the world and moral foundations are established. These early years of life, hence, are critical to the development of intelligence, personality and social behavior in an infant. Research on brain development attests to the importance of key mental, physical and social capabilities. If these fundamental capabilities are not well established from the start, and especially if neurological damage occurs, a child's learning potential could be adversely affected. As such, education in early childhood must have its own specific practices.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the education that children obtain during early stages of their childhood. Early childhood is a crucial time period for the development of the mental functions of children. This development, including the emergence of the abilities and skills in areas such as language, motor skills, psychosocial cognitive and learning, is now known to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, including the nature of the educational environment to which the child is exposed during the first 6 to 8 years of life. Early childhood education often focuses on children learning through play. This age range provides the opportunity to reinforce the view of the development as a continuum. ECE facilitates the interaction between the pre and initial school years.

**History of Early childhood Education in India**

The concept of infant schools was introduced in India by the British missionaries in the latter part of the 18th century when such schools were set up in the western and southern regions of India. Some institutions for training teachers for infant schools were also started by these missionaries. The early pioneers of the movement were Gijubhai Badheka, Tarabai Modak, Maria Montessori, and several others. The writings of great Indian educational thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Zakir Hussain have also drawn attention to this important aspect of education in the formative years of a child’s life. Gijubhai Badheka and Tarabai Modak were among the early educators. They set up the Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh in 1925. A training centre at Bhavnagar Dakshinamoorti was started by Gijubhai and, later, one was set up by Tarabai at Dadar, Bombay. The systematic attempt to educate children from all sections of the society began in 1937 with the educational philosophy of Gandhiji. Gandhiji’s Basic Education scheme was designed to set up free and compulsory Education at National level. Maria Montessori’s 1939 visited in India implanted the foundations of the Pre-
school education in India and teachers were trained in Montessori’s methods of education. Her major’s books were translated into many Indian languages.

**Trends in ECE in India**

The overall progress at the national level in child development, although still leaving a wide scope for improvement, could be attributed to a distinct acknowledgment of the significance of ECE/child development in the Indian social and political contexts. This is clearly evident in the constitutional provisions, legislative measures, policy frameworks and public initiatives in place for the protection, welfare and development of children. ECE provisions in India are available through three distinct channels -- public, private and non-governmental. The recent trends in ECE are given below:

**ECE Programmes under Department of Women and Child Development:**

The Department of Women and Child Development was set up in the year 1985 as a part of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to give the much needed impetus to the holistic development of women and children. For the holistic development of the child, the Ministry has been implementing the world's largest and most unique and outreach programme of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) providing a package of services comprising supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check up and referral services, pre-school non-formal education.

- **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**

As a sequel to the adoption of the National Policy for Children, Government of India initiated the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS), on pilot basis in 1975. Over the last three decades, however this scheme has emerged as a major national strategy for promoting holistic early childhood development in the country. The ICDS offers a package of health, nutrition and preschool education services to children, from pre-natal stage to the age of six years and to pregnant and lactating mothers, following a life cycle approach. Some ICDS centers, which are typically for 3-6 year olds for preschool education, have been extended to include crèches for the younger children. But the number of these crèches is insignificant. In fact a study conducted by NIPCCD (2003) found that these crèches are for the most part custodial in nature and tend to miss out on the early stimulation and psycho-social interaction that is important for the under 3’s. In
order to meet the massive training needs of ICDS functionaries, from the inception of the programme itself, GOI formulated a Comprehensive Training Strategy (CTS) for different functionaries involved in the programme. National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) is identified as the apex institute for training of functionaries of this programme at national level. Over five hundred thousand ICDS functionaries have been given Job Training Course and about two hundred thirty thousand functionaries have been given refresher training till now since inception of the programme. A common criticism of ICDS programme is about the focus in the program on the older age group of 3-6 years for nutrition and other services, at the cost of the under 3’s which is the more critical growth faltering stage. Also, the focus is more on the feeding aspect rather than on promoting behaviour change in child care practices in the community, which is likely to be more sustainable.

➢ Early Childhood Education Scheme

The Early Childhood Education Scheme (ECE) was started in 1982 by the Department of Education as a distinct strategy to reduce the dropout rate and to improve the rate of retention of children in primary schools. The scheme was transferred to Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in 1987–88. This scheme of providing grant – in –aid to voluntary organizations to run preschool education centers was being implemented in nine educationally backward states (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal) in the areas not covered by ICDS. This scheme has been discontinued with effect from 1st April, 2001 in view of universalization of ICDS.

➢ Scheme of Assistance to Voluntary Organizations for running Crèches for Children of Working and Ailing

The above federally sponsored scheme was started in 1975 in pursuance of the priority objectives of the National Policy for Children, 1974. Its aim was to provide day care services for the children (0-5 years) of mainly casual, migrant, agriculture and construction labourers .The scheme also catered to children of those women who were sick or incapacitated due to sickness or suffering from communicable diseases. Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) an autonomous body under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) and Bhartiya Adim Jati
Seva Sangh (BAJSS) two national level voluntary organisations were responsible for implementing the scheme.

**National Crèche Fund**

The National Crèche Fund (NCF) was set up in 1994 to meet the growing requirement for crèches with a corpus fund made available from the social safety net adjustment credit from the World Bank. Crèches under this scheme provided day care facilities, supplementary nutrition, immunization, medical and health care and recreation services to children below five years. NIPCCD in 1995 conducted the national evaluation of NCF scheme covering aspects such as attainment of objectives, adequacy of infrastructure facilities, and training status of crèche workers, assessment of quality and coverage of services. The study concluded that a majority of the mothers and children were satisfied with the quantity and quality of supplementary nutrition and most of the beneficiaries and community leaders had a positive perception of the program.

**Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Working Mothers**

Keeping in mind the need for an effective and expanded scheme for childcare facilities, a new crèche scheme named Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme has been recently launched for the children of working mothers. The scheme has been designed by merging the existing two schemes of National Crèche Fund and the Scheme of Assistance to Voluntary Organisations for running crèches for Children of Working and Ailing Mothers. Under the scheme, the crèches are being allocated to the States/UTs on the basis of the proportion of child population. Uncovered districts / tribal areas under the scheme are being given highest priority so as to ensure the balanced regional coverage. The services being provided include sleeping facilities, health care, supplementary nutrition, immunization, preschool education etc. Every crèche unit would provide these services for 25 babies for eight hours i.e. from 9.00 a.m to 5.00 p.m. Currently, 22038 crèches have been sanctioned to run across the country.

**ECE under Primary /Elementary Education Programs: Some Innovative Initiatives**

Social justice and equity are by themselves a strong argument for providing basic education for all. It is an established fact that basic education improves the level of human well-being especially with regard to life expectancy, infant mortality, of children. In accordance with the Constitutional commitment to ensure free and compulsory education
for all children up to the age of 14 years, provision of universal elementary education has been a salient feature of national policy since independence. A number of schemes and programmes were launched in pursuance of the emphasis on elementary education programme.

**District Primary Education Program (DPEP)**

Taking cognizance of the importance of ECE as an important factor in promoting retention of children in primary schooling, this component was included in the design of the externally funded District Primary Education Program (DPEP). The benefits of ECE were seen in terms of not only the children’s own preparation for primary schooling, but also as a service for releasing girls from the burden of sibling care to attend school. The approach under DPEP was one of convergence. It provided for strengthening of existing provisions for ECE through the ICDS. It service providers were compensated for the longer working hours from the DPEP budget. New centers were opened on the same model, only where ICDS was not physically in operation. Programmatic linkages were also attempted between pre-school and primary school under DPEP, by introducing the component of school readiness as an initial part of the primary curriculum and by continuing the play-based methodology in grades one and two. An evaluation of DPEP indicates that girls’ enrolment and school attendance was found to be higher in DPEP states with ECE centers than without ECE centers (Rao & Sharma, 2002). The evaluation also observed that the DPEP model for ECE (adjacent to and part of the school) is more effective in providing the children an stimulating educational environment and in creating a sense of ‘bonding’ with the school which can go a long way in promoting retention.

**Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**

The SSA, which is a flagship program of the Government of India (GOI) for universalizing Elementary Education and which has succeeded the DPEP, unfortunately did not incorporate the ECE component of the DPEP in its full form. Instead it provide for a limited ‘innovations grant’ for ECE for each district, which did not allow for scaling up of the facility. A possible reason could be the exclusion of the under 6 age group from the legislation recently enacted by the National Parliament for making elementary education a fundamental right and therefore a justifiable national commitment towards children, but only from 6 to 14 years of age. However, subsequent to the launching of the SSA, the GOI recently also launched the National Programme for Education of Girls at
Elementary Level (NPEGEL) under the umbrella scheme of SSA for especially backward administrative blocks. Provision has been made under this programme for opening of childcare centers at the cluster level to facilitate girls’ participation in elementary education.

❖ Preschools attached to primary schools

The Education/convergence model of ECE is one of ‘center attached’ to the primary school. Currently only 14.27 per cent primary schools have attached pre primary sections. (NIEPA, 2003)

❖ Janshala

Janshala (GOI-UN) programme, which has now closed, was a collaborative effort of the GOI and five UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, ILO and UNFPA) to provide program support to the ongoing efforts towards achieving Universal Primary Education. The programme established pre schooling as a vital component for improving children’s learning and development and ECE centers were set up on the same convergence model as under DPEP. Women’s groups were mobilized to set up and manage the ECE centers. These centers were set up in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. In the case of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, a large number of such centers were set up, on community demand, primarily in hilly and tribal areas that led to an increase in girl’s attendance in schools (MHRD, GOI, 2003). While all these innovative initiatives have demonstrates some good practices in ECE, the scaling up of these has been an issue. While there may be several factors hindering this, a significant reason is the inability of the states to take on the additional liability due to acute paucity of resources, human and financial. At the same time, it needs to be put on record that there are several features of the DPEP and some other projects, not necessarily related to ECE, which have actually informed the design and implementation of the subsequent SSA program, which was another federally supported program.

❖ Voluntary/NGO Initiatives

The ECE services being provided by voluntary and non government organizations play a vital role in providing education for all ages in socially and economic backward areas. These organizations primarily work with special communities in difficult circumstances like tribal people, migrant laborers and rural children in specific contexts. They run
crèches and ECE centers by mobilizing local resources. Some NGO’s also run mobile crèches, which move along with the construction labour from one site to another. Although effectiveness of these programs has not been systematically evaluated, children who attend them are more likely to move on to primary schools and parents have generally reported positive outcomes (Swaminathan, 1998). Some of the NGO’s designed programs (such as those run by Ruchika, SEWA, Nutan Bal Sangha, etc) have also demonstrated successful methodologies for meeting child care needs of diverse communities. These organizations are largely funded by the Government, National and International aid agencies. In addition to these, some universities also have Laboratory Nursery Schools attached to them, particularly to Departments of Child Development. The curriculum in these pre-schools is generally more innovative and developmentally appropriate. Various religious groups often also run some pre schools some of which are fairly competitive with preschools in the private sector.

➢ Private Initiatives

Private initiative here refers to fee charging/profit making initiatives in ECE. In India, as elsewhere, ECE falls in a dual track mode (Swaminathan, 1993, 1998). While the public sponsored ICDS caters to children from disadvantaged communities, private initiatives are targeted towards children of socio-economically better off families. These impart preschool education through nurseries, kindergarten and pre primary classes in private schools. Though exact figures are not available, it is estimated that about 10 million children receive ECE from privately owned programs (Sharma, 1998). This type of pre schooling is oversubscribed and the competition for spaces in the lead schools is intense, with as many as 300 children competing for a single opening (Prochner, 2002). This phenomenon is not limited to the elite. In fact, it has resulted what may be termed a bourgeois revolution by the growth of consumer class and more parents who are able to purchase their children a preschool experience (Stern, 1993). A study in Tamilnadu found that even parents from low-income communities in urban areas sought private pre schools for their children once they reached the age of 4 years (M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation, 2000). The committee appointed by Government of India on ECE also reports that socially and economically upward mobile families are often fleeing from public initiatives towards locally available alternative, so-called English medium schools. In the absence of any system of regulation or even registration at the ECE stage, the education offered by these programs is of wide range. Some of these pre-schools are more
of ‘teaching shops’ that do not respect/regard the developmental norms of children. In some cases the quality offered can often be counterproductive to children’s development and may even be described as ‘miseducation’. (Kaul, 1998)

Issues and Concerns regarding ECE in India

❖ Increasing Coverage

Despite the regular expansion of the ICDS, the coverage of children for ECE is still as low as 20 percent. This is an issue of both inadequate access and inadequate quality of service delivery. With ICDS continuing to be the main vehicle for ECE, the GOI is proposing to expand the service further and universalize it within the next few years. While this is a welcome proposal, the risk is of expanding too fast and compromising on quality. Also, it may amount to ‘doing more of the same thing’ which has shown benefits to an extent but not commensurate with the investments made. Some of the areas requiring strengthening have been identified as targeting of the poorest communities, contextualizing of the program design, rationalizing of the workload of the service provider, promoting utilization through improvement in quality of service delivery, greater accountability and outcome focus and closer convergence with allied sectors (World Bank, 2004).

❖ Decentralized and holistic planning for children

In present Indian diversity and scale, the planning process and designing of interventions for children have to be contextualized. This can only be possible through a decentralized and participatory approach to planning and implementation. The Education sector already has experience of this approach to some extent and the programs/services for younger children would need to learn from this experience and reach out to children in a more targeted and local specific mode.

❖ Ownership of ECE

Very recently, the total responsibility of ECE has been shifted from Department of Education within the Ministry of Human Resource Development to a newly created Ministry of Women and Child Development. Though, it is too early to comment upon the implications of this decision, however, it is likely to generate a lot of discussion and debate about the issue of ownership and its logistic location with the education sector.
Quality and regulation of Early Childhood Education
Research has indicated that the extent of ECE impact is directly related to quality of provision. The current approach in the public sector has been more of a minimalist approach, which is not likely to pay dividends. It is important to at least ensure basic learning conditions for children, including availability of professionally trained teachers. In addition to ensuring basic infrastructure and provisions, two important aspects that have direct implications and need to be addressed are the ECE curriculum and training.

Curriculum in ECCE for 3-6 year olds
In India, in terms of policy and aligned curriculum goals, there is a clear understanding that the first six years of life are critical for laying a sound foundation for a child’s lifelong learning and development. It aims to promote all round development of the child from prenatal stage to 8 years. This implies addressing different aspects such as cognitive development, language development, social and emotional development, physical and motor development, development of creativity and aesthetic appreciation, development of values related to personal, social and cultural life, scientific ways of thinking and inculcation of healthy habits. The activities, experiences and environment necessary for promoting the development in all the above areas constitute the core of an ECE curriculum. The curriculum is envisaged in three sub-stages ---early stimulation for under 3’s largely through parental involvement and education in a relatively unstructured mode, the organized center based play and development- oriented curriculum for the 3-5 year olds and the school readiness curriculum which overlaps for the 4-6 year olds and includes reading and writing readiness and number readiness, as a preparation for primary schooling. National Curriculum Framework (2005) views education of child from ECE to grade II along a continuum and emphasizes continuity of approach and methodology. All curriculum frameworks discourage formal teaching as well as formal evaluation of children at ECE stage. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has over the years published several guidebooks and training manuals for ECE to be used by the states and agencies implementing ECE.

Prescription vs. Practice
While, a favourable policy framework and appropriate curricular guidance is available in the country for ECE; the reality is that there is a large gap between what is prescribed or suggested and what is practiced. In a study conducted by the NCERT (1998), it was found
that almost all the ICDS centers observed adhered to teaching of 3 R’s (reading, writing and arithmetic) and there was a virtual absence of any play activities. Typically, the activities of pre-school education under ICDS are conducted for a period ranging from 45 minutes to two hours duration daily, with minimal play and learning material support and that too, largely in the absence of sufficient outdoor and indoor spaces, basic infrastructure facilities and competent workers. Pre-school education in private/public nursery schools, again, is largely a downward extension of primary education curriculum, with teachers often having no ECE training. This gap between policy and practice can be specifically attributed to the absence of any system of control and accreditation system in India, which could regulate the quality of ECE. This has provided a situation of laissez faire which has in turn resulted in a mushroom growth of private unrecognized institutions, particularly in the urban sector. These institutions have no qualms about adopting the primary curriculum at a stage when children are not developmentally ready, and implementing it in a rigid and regimented way; thus imposing academic pressures on young children; these pressures become the starting point of the phenomenon referred to as “curriculum load”, which can be very counterproductive to learning. Teaching of Three Rs, Formal Evaluation, admission at an early age of 2 or 2 and half years, admission tests for children and parents, home work, demand for English as medium of interaction, and a large number of books from private publishers prescribed by schools for young kids are other areas of concern which relate to curriculum of ECE and are more specific to private nursery and primary schools. These practices are acknowledged to be detrimental to the health of children and of the system as a whole and the policy documents lay stress on the need to educate the community to be more selective and/or demanding as consumers which could serve as an effective monitoring/regulating device. This aspect needs to be promoted further.

Training Inputs and Institutional Support
Effective preparation of teachers/service providers for ECE is another issue, which is expected to determine quality. Corresponding to the range of ECE programs and initiatives in India there is a variety of training provisions in ECE, as well. These range from the two year integrated Nursery Teachers’ training program (NTT) which aims at preparing teachers for pre-school stage (3-6 years) and for the first two grades (6-8 years) of the primary stage. In addition, The Open and Distance Learning mode of training is also being used extensively to offer Certificate and Diploma courses in ECE. Indira
Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), and several other State Specific Open Universities also offer specialized certificate and/or diploma courses in ECE through Open Distance Learning system. The National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) has also undertaken the task of regulating authority of the institutions offering Pre-primary and Nursery Teacher Training Courses. These institutions are functioning more than fifteen States. While there is wide spectrum of training provisions, there are marked variations as well, which reduce the scope for any standardization or quality control. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), which is a statutory body, has laid down the norms and standards for two programs namely Pre School and Nursery Teacher Education Programmes. These norms laid down by NCTE are now expected to impact on quality.

**CONCLUSION**

It emerges that ECE is of critical importance in a child’ growth process, more so in the contemporary times when a child is exposed to innumerable things that were not even a part of the life of the previous generation. What is of significance is that a child has to be trained in aspects that are equally new to the imparters of ECE. This makes it pertinent to have a proper policy and line of thought for the ones undertaking the responsibility of ECE. As discussed, there are agencies that are doing the same but a lot needs to be done yet. Children are the future of a nation and a creative and conducive ECE is one major step in that direction that needs to be efficiently and effectively implemented.

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