

Early Childhood Care and Education: Laying a strong foundation for learning

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the importance of Pre Primary Education which builds a strong skill foundation for formal learning in early primary grades, improves learning outcomes, narrows down the achievement gaps, reduces the need for remedial education, and can boost children's learning in the later life. It also highlights the significant role of early years as emphasized in National Education Policy 2020 and the various models recommended. An attempt has been made to illustrate how it is implemented in SamagraShiksha scheme, which is an integrated scheme of the Government of India for school education covering the entire gamut from pre-school to class XII. Some of the best practices in ECCE at National as well as International are also included.

Keywords Pre-primary education, ECCE, early years, National Education Policy, SamagraShiksha

I. INTRODUCTION

Education plays an important role in the Human Development of any country and the greatest tool to support its economic growth. The Ministry of Education, Govt. of India has launched many initiatives to provide quality education to one and all. In 2018, the Integrated Scheme for School Education- SamagraShiksha was launched which envisages the school as a continuum from Pre-School to Senior Secondary levels, also sometimes referred to as KG to 12. The scheme not only provides support for the implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 but has also been aligned with the recommendations of **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**. The Framework for Implementation of SamagraShiksha recognizes the need and importance of preschool education, as has been pointed out in multiple research studies

Preschool programmes in India are known by different nomenclatures i.e. Anganwadis, Balwadis, nursery school, preschool, preparatory

classes, kindergarten, lower kindergarten (LKG), upper kindergarten (UKG), play centres, crèches, balvatikas etc. Preschool programmes have been offered through government anganwadicentres, preschools attached to government schools in some cases, private sector schools and civil society organizations. In 2013, Government of India adopted the National ECCE Policy which lays out the vision for children below the age of six years and is aligned to The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) which came into effect in April 2010. and Goal 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 adopted by the Government.

Under SamagraShiksha, the preschool programme is recognized as a critical component of the existing NIPUN Bharat programme that focuses on foundational learning of early language and literacy and early numeracy in early grades of primary school, thereby recognizing the continuum from pre-school to early grades (classes 1 to 3) of school. The SamagraShiksha scheme lays down guidelines for safe and secure infrastructure including sanitation facilities; developmentally appropriate curriculum, learning activities, pedagogical practices and assessment; professional development of teachers and community participation and engagement. The scheme further lays emphasis on ensuring coordination and convergence with the Ministry of Women and Child Development for curriculum development, capacity building of Anganwadi workers, mentoring and support by school teachers and headmasters, augmenting learning materials.

II. RATIONALE OF ECE

At the early ages, children are curious about every new thing they see, every new word, and often have unlimited questions for every unique experience they go through. Enrolling a child in a school makes him/her adapt to new surroundings and also contributes to overall development. Previous research and studies show that early childhood education has an immense

effect on the holistic development of the child and lays a strong foundation of education in her/his life. Therefore, early childhood education has greater advantage to make the child independent, create a positive and well-balanced self-image and develop intellectual abilities. Through exploration and discovery at school, children learn to understand the environment around them. Through the learning and play based activities at school, children learn the skills and strategies that they use to explore and learn about the world and to solve challenges and problems. During early childhood, children develop new cognitive abilities and it is often thought of as growth in children's thinking, reasoning and understanding. Early childhood education also puts emphasis as children observe and explore mathematical dimensions of their world which involves various concepts such as space, shape, colour and early numeracy skills.

In the United States, educational researchers used meta-analysis of 22 high-quality experimental studies to assess the impact of ECE on medium and long-term impacts on educational outcomes. It was found that on average, participation in ECE leads to statistically significant grade retention and increases in high school graduation rates. The results support ECE's utility for promoting child well-being.

Early Childhood Education makes a positive contribution to children's long-term development and learning by facilitating an enabling and stimulating environment in these foundation years of lifelong learning. Recent evidence from an Indian study confirms that a good quality ECE programme during these critical years can lead to the child's holistic development, which in turn leads to improved levels of school readiness which finally leads to higher level of learning levels in primary grades. Children that attend pre-school education have higher school completion rates, lower repetition rates, higher score in reading and math and higher labour market productivity.

A study on "The Right Start: Investing in early years of education" conducted by Save the Children, India suggested the ways to improve the ICDS and Anganwadi centres with special focus on pre-school education. It has been highlighted through the study that ICDS programme lays more emphasis on nutrition, growth monitoring and immunization of children. However, the pre-school education component is neglected in ICDS.

It is observed from the NAS results 2018 report which depicts those students having attended pre-primary schools leads to their higher achievement. In high performing states, 73% students have attended pre-primary schools.

A study (CECED, 2013) in India has revealed that phonetics, communication skills and cognitive activities such as sequential thinking and classification are areas needing attention. However, any discussions or conclusions regarding school readiness or what we expect children to know and do before entering school will be guided by three basic factors: the diversity of children's early life experiences as well as inequity in experiences; the wide variation in young children's development and learning; and the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences (NAEYC, 1995). The concept of readiness includes much more than children's readiness. School readiness is currently defined by three interlinked dimensions: a) ready children; b) ready schools; and c) ready families and communities. 'Children are not innately ready or not ready for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school', (Maxwell & Clifford 2004). Children, schools and families are considered ready when they have gained the competencies and skills required to interface with the other dimensions and support smooth transitions of children from home to ECCE centre and subsequently to primary school.

III. INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

As per the Finland's model on ECE, it is mandatory for children to attend a subsidized early childhood education programme which is based on learning through play. Through studies it is observed that that from birth to age five the brain develops more rapidly than at any other stage of life, and it is also most sensitive to influences from the external environment (such as cognitive stimulation, language development, care, imagination etc).

Singapore also takes a strong initiative to improve the quality of ECE teacher training (Choo, 2009). The Singapore government has increased staff requirements for ECE teachers. Preschool teachers are required to pass five subjects in the secondary school certificate examinations in order to work (Choo, 2009). Staff training is important to enhance the quality of ECE teachers. Three specific examples of programs that have been found to enhance staff training in ECE include Mexico's Preschool Curricular and Pedagogical Renewal Programme (PRONAE), the Dominican Republic Early Education Strengthening Program, and Brazil's Initial Education Program for ECE

Educators (Proinfantil) (UNESCO Latin America, 2010). Training ECE teachers provides them with the knowledge to understand the important development of young children.

According to UNESCO, one of the most established quality models that promote quality in ECE is Chile's Early Childhood Education Board (Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantile) (UNESCO Latin America, 2010). This model hoped to measure the management quality within ECE centres and to inform these centres of how to make improvements. The model analysed six factors: leadership, satisfaction of the school community, financial management and administration, educational management, family and community engagement, and protection and care (UNESCO Latin America, 2010).

Mexico also provides an example of a nationwide program that enhances quality. The program titled, "Inter-sectoral Project on Early Childhood Welfare Indicators" developed indicators, which were discussed at a national level, to identify the status of ECE in Mexico (UNESCO Latin America, 2010). There were a total of 28 indicators with 13 categories that covered issues such as equipment, resources, educational agents, materials, planning, educational processes, curriculum, group environment, supervision, school administration, assessment, and direction (UNESCO Latin America, 2010).

IV. ECCE IN THE NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020

The New Education Policy 2020 reflects India's overall vision for Education. To realize this much focus is laid on Early childhood Education To achieve universalization of ECCE and develop the school readiness among all children, four models are proposed in the policy document i.e. (a) Stand-alone Anganwadis; (b) Anganwadis co-located with the primary school; (c) pre-primary schools/sections covering at least age 5 to 6 years co-located with existing primary schools; and (d) stand-alone pre-schools. Policy talks about the arrangement of trained teacher/staff in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECCE to implement the related activities.

In the co-location model, anganwadi centre under the Women and Child Development Ministry will be harnessed for the preparatory class which would also ensure health check-ups and growth monitoring of the child. NEP emphasized to train the current Anganwadi workers into high-quality ECCE teachers as per the curricular framework developed by the National Council for Education Research and Training.

ECCE will be implemented jointly by the ministries of Education; Women and Child Development; Health and Family Welfare and Tribal Affairs An initiative NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for proficiency in reading with understanding and Numeracy has been launched as a part of New Educational Policy NEP 2020. It aims to cover the learning needs of children in the age group of 3 to 9 years. and is envisaged to making the experience of learning at the foundational stage Holistic, Integrated, Inclusive, joyful and Engaging. To realize these objectives Innovative pedagogies will be used in classroom transactions such as toy-based learning, play-way and activity method, teaching through folk songs and stories experiential learning, etc.

V. SUMMARY OF SOME GOOD PRACTICES OF ECCE IN INDIA:

- **Chandigarh**
Twinning of Anganwadi Centres has been done with nearby Government. Schools with an aim to ensure quality academic support to children in the age group of 03-06 years being covered through Anganwadi Centres. The nursery teachers of the schools are acting as mentors for Anganwadi workers and are developing common monthly activity planners to be followed in both pre-primary classes and Anganwadi Centres.
 - In order to foster creativity, curiosity and discovery amongst young children, there is a need to develop areas within the classrooms which can supplement the classroom teaching to achieve the learning outcomes defined in NIPUN Bharat Mission and NCERT curriculum guidelines for pre-primary grades. Accordingly, under project 'Kilkari', all the Govt. schools having pre-primary classes have been strengthened with Teaching Learning Material and creation of different activity corners within the classroom as well as in the play area outside the classroom.
- **Uttar Pradesh**
Preschool program is based on the teaching of Austrian writer Rudolf Steiner, and it strives to nurture a child's spirit, soul, body and interests. So preschool program is always related to activity learning by doing, play and fun to learn. The Department of Basic education has developed a State level committee to develop guidelines for the establishment of Balvatikas/activity rooms in primary schools, to facilitate play and activity-based school readiness program. These Balvatikas will be primarily used by class 1 children for the three-month school readiness program. The MOE has developed guidelines for 3 month school

readiness program, namely, VidyaPravesh. The VidyaPravesh document provides with guidelines on the use of play and activity based pedagogy and on the framework for a three month calendar. DoBE, UP has adopted the same and has developed a 3 month school readiness calendar for class 1 children. DoBE is also providing a school readiness kit to each of the model Balvatikas

- **Kerala:**

The state has set up 'Thalolam' Activity corners in all Government supported pre-primary schools. Dramatic Play Corner, Maths Corner, Science Corner, Reading Corner, Music Corner, Drawing Corner and Block Corner were set up in all Pre-Primary Schools.

The state has set up Model Pre-primary schools with Activity Areas with the co-operation of Local Self Governments. Attractive learning environments were created in these schools by converting the Indoor and outdoor spaces flexible and responsive to the interests and rights of individual children. The activity areas are designed to be spacious, having child friendly furniture and attractive set up that tempt children to engage in play activities of their interest freely and fearlessly. Dramatic Play Area, Science Area, Nature(Green) Area, Art Area, Block Area, Manipulative and Discovery Area, Literary Area, Music and Movement Area, Computer Area, Sensory Table Area, Mathematics Area, Indoor gross motor play Area and Outdoor Gross Motor Play Area were set in all the 42 schools.

- Locally specific and culturally specific teaching learning materials were developed for the 'Thalolam Activity Corners' by conducting creative workshops in Pre-Primary schools with the participation of parents and local experts.

VI. ECCE CURRICULUM

The ECCE programme needs to be determined by children's developmental and contextual needs, providing for more need based inputs and an enabling environment. A National ECCE Curriculum Framework was developed by Ministry of WCD which promotes play based, experiential and child friendly provision for early education and all round development of the child. Subsequently, The Quality Standards framework identifies the key principles, indicators and exemplary good practices required for assuring quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services. These standards allow for the progress towards self - assessment, accreditation and finally certification of ECCE provisions. The framework allows programmes to assess quality,

and identify the possible lacunae that need to be addressed if quality ECCE is to be provided.

ECCE under the anganwadi system, till now, primarily focused on the nutrition and the health of a child, while in private space, the play school system was unregulated. Recently, Ministry of Education launched the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for the foundational stage for children between ages three to eight. This is the first time the NCF has been prepared for the foundational stage and children aged three will be brought into the formal schooling system as proposed in the National Education Policy-2020 (NEP). The structured curriculum for the foundational stage which will help to achieve its overall goals

VII. TEACHER'S PREPAREDNESS IN ECCE: LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Ministry of WCD has prepared a training module which is part of the job training module for Anganwadi Workers and focuses only on the early childhood care and education (ECCE) part of the training. The purpose of the module is to guide trainers to train Anganwadi Workers so that they are able to plan and conduct appropriate ECE activities for 3 to 6 year olds. It is designed to provide the Anganwadi Worker a basic understanding of the ECCE curriculum and pedagogical approaches to ensure optimal and holistic development of young children so that they are ready to start formal schooling at the age of six years. It also includes a component on psychosocial development of children below the age of 3 years, to help Anganwadi Workers counsel parents/caregivers on early stimulation. In the view of NEP 2020, NCERT is under process to design the training module for ECCE teachers and Anganwadi workers. A pedagogical framework and school readiness package will also be prepared by NCERT.

VIII. WAY FORWARD

- a) Implementation of NEP to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all the children in accordance with SDGs.
- b) Networking with various stakeholders to provide quality ECCE and improved learning outcomes of children, reduce drop-out rate.
- c) Focus on developing the readiness of children, families and schools so that smooth transition of children can be done from ECCE to grade I.
- d) Optimum infrastructure to provide safe & secure and child friendly environment to the children.

- e) Enriched parental involvement to provide a stimulating learning environment to the child.
- f) Trained ECCE teachers to deliver the required quality pedagogy and interventions in early years.

- [7]. Data retrieved from Draft Annual Report of ECCE, 2021-22.

IX. CONCLUSION

Pre Primary Education is the important component which builds a strong skill foundation for formal learning in early primary grades, improves learning outcomes, narrows down the achievement gaps, reduces the need for remedial education, and can boost children's learning in the later life. It has been observed that, there is a strong link between access to preschool services and long-term benefits, when preschool is of good quality. Early childhood services are particularly important for reducing inequality: early gaps in learning and skills trap disadvantaged children in lower developmental trajectories from which it becomes increasingly difficult to escape. Hence, it is significant to provide quality pre-primary education to children across the country.

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