

Early Childhood Education - WHERE INDIA STANDS.

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The big ECCE crossroad-

ECCE is caught between our emotions and our intellect. ECCE holds a unique position in education and exploiting its qualities is the optimal tool for leveraging its potential for the success of this country's children and future citizens.

The power of ECCE-

The early childhood years is when a child is developing the potential to think rationally, persist in the face of challenge, use language adeptly, suppress impulse, regulate emotion, respond sympathetically to others' distress, and cooperate with peers. These skills will help them in the later years in acquiring the cognitive and social skills essential for becoming productive members of our society.

Why there is confusion in 'whose child' is ECCE?

Because ECCE includes a two-tier organization of services, "child care" for the younger children and "pre-primary education" for the 3- to 6-year-olds. The problem till date is that the entire focus of the WCWM has been taken up with child care and rightly so as mal nutrition and health issues are many. But that leaves the education part completely ignored, so even in the ICDS programs the health and nutrition aspect is kind of worked out but the education aspect is where the centers lack proper infrastructure, learning equipment, toys, teacher training and training of supervisors. Experience shows that greater progress is made when a central vision is put at the centre of ECEC policy, and a dedicated ministry nominated to translate this vision into reality.

Situation of ECCE in India-

India is a signatory to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 and Education for All (EFA) 1990. The latter has postulated ECCE as the very first goal to be achieved for Education for All, since "learning begins at birth". The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and Moscow Framework for Action (2010) have reaffirmed the commitment to ECCE.

Of the 158.7 million children in the below six years category (Census 2011), about 75.7 million children i.e. 48 percent are reported to be covered under the ICDS (MWCD, 2011). Broad estimations indicate that a significant number is also covered by the private sector, besides some limited coverage by the NGO sector for which we have no data.

The Government of India recognizes the significance of ECCE, in the following ways,

- included as a constitutional provision through the amended Article 45 (The Constitution Act, 2002) which directs that "The State shall Endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years".
- In the National Policy for Children (1974), consequent to which the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was initiated on a pilot basis in 1975 (objective of laying the foundation for holistic and integrated development of child and building capabilities of caregivers).
- The National Policy on Education (1986) considers ECCE to be a critical input for human development.
- The National Nutrition Policy (1993) has also recommended ~~interventions~~ interventions for child care and nutrition during early childhood.
- The National Health Policy (2002) and National Plan of Action for Children (2005) have also been supportive policy initiatives for early childhood.
- The 11th Five Year Plan has acknowledged the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the stage that lays the foundation for life-long development and the realization of a child's full potential and directs that "all children be provided at least one year of preschool education in the age group of 3-6 years." I
- The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) which came into effect from April 1, 2010, has also addressed ECCE under Section 11 of the Act which states, "with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to

provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years, the appropriate Government may make necessary arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children”.

So how does the Indian government take care of its littlest citizens?

ECCE services are delivered through public, private and non-governmental channels.

In the public sector, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the world's largest programme imparting ECCE. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) have also supported setting up of ECCE centers, attached to primary schools the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Working Mothers offers care and education services for children below 6 years of age.

The private sector in an organized or unorganized form, with varied quality, is perhaps, the second largest service provider of ECCE, and its outreach is steadily percolating even into the rural areas across the country. In the voluntary sector, there are smaller scale initiatives. These are largely supported by trusts, societies, religious groups or international funding agencies.

So if India recognizes its commitment to ECCE, then what is wrong?

After more than 65 years of independence we have no defined, documented policy in ECCE, no curriculum framework for ECE centers and no qualifications specified for ECCE teachers. The quality of non formal preschool/ early childhood care and education imparted through these multiple channels is uneven, and varies from a minimalist approach to a mushrooming of accelerated academic programmes. This is largely an outcome of inadequate understanding of the concept of ECCE, its philosophy and importance among all stakeholders. This coupled with inadequate institutional capacity in the system and an absence of standards, regulatory norms and mechanisms as well as a lack of understanding of the basic premises of ECCE has aggravated the problem.

But we have an ECE policy...

This whole Policy is just a vision document, a collection of correctly worded sentences. So then is a policy just supposed to be a vision document? Or is it supposed to outline a strategy and/a course of action? Will this policy go to the parliament to be turned to a bill? If this is the procedure for passing a bill, then should not this policy be spelled out concretely?

Present policy is more of a vision than a policy document as it just lists what the government would like to do and not how and by when would it do it.

- The ICDS Anganwadi Centre (AWC) would be repositioned as...
- Family based/ Community based and NGO based ECCE service delivery model would be experimented and promoted....
- To ensure universal access to integrated child development opportunities for all young children, the policy may support the option of ICDS complementing the private sector/voluntary sector programmes...
- Linkage with primary school system will be streamlined...
- To standardize the quality of ECCE available to children, basic Quality Standards and Specifications will be laid down....
- A Regulatory Framework for ECCE to ensure basic quality inputs and outcomes, across all service providers/ sectors undertaking such services, will be progressively developed/ evolved at the national level and shall be implemented by states, with appropriate customization, in the next five years.
- A developmentally appropriate National Curriculum Framework for ECCE will be developed
- and continuous child assessment would also be explored
- The policy envisages the establishment of an ECCE Cell / Division within MWCD as a nodal agency for interface

Sadly the earlier “rich” policies have not been consulted (Kothari Commission, Yashpal Report and the NCERT document especially designed for early childhood set-up's), and the current issues like franchises, “internationalization” are not addressed at all. The draft policy is more about ICDS and makes a distinction between ICDS and private set ups, why? Aren't children the same? Aren't their developmental needs the same? Then why this distinction? The non-negotiable of course will be the same, but will quality be the same for all or will the policy define different parameters for private and government? If parameters will be the same then the ICDS program will have to be upgraded to become a model for all to emulate and implement. What is the plan for that?

How does our vision policy compare to the world?

Most countries have the following defined-

1. A National Quality Framework includes: a national legislative framework that consists of: the Education and Care Services National Law ('National Law') the Education and Care Services National Regulations ('National Regulations')
2. a National Quality Standard consisting of seven Quality Areas: Educational program and practice
 - Children's health and safety
 - Physical environment
 - Staffing arrangements
 - Relationships with children
 - Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
 - Leadership and service management.
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3. a national quality rating and assessment process through which services are assessed against the National Quality Standard by Regulatory Authorities and provided with a rating from one of the five rating levels.
4. a Regulatory Authority in each state and territory who have primary responsibility for the approval, monitoring and quality assessment of services in their jurisdiction in accordance with the national legislative framework and in relation to the National Quality Standard
5. A national body—to oversee the system and guide its implementation in a nationally consistent way.

How did these countries achieve this? How have these countries worked on their ECE policy?

ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT- OECD is a unique forum where the governments of 30 democracies work together. The OECD member countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The OECD Education Committee is a forum for the Education Ministries of the OECD countries. The Committee meets at OECD headquarters twice a year to discuss education policy and issues. Visits and the reports from the review can be viewed on the project Web site: www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood

All these member countries have strengthened their early childhood policies, quality frameworks, curriculum guidelines by working together and pooling their research and draft models. Other countries too have learnt from them, Mauritius, Singapore, Republic of Dominica are not represented in this group but have strong policy document, curriculum framework and quality standards. World over most of the countries have an ECCE policy, ECCE curriculum framework, ECCE quality documents in place, then why are we reinventing the wheel? Why not study the best and then work out what best suits our set ups in India?

What is happening world over in ECCE?

- Research
- Fee subsidy to parents by government
- National ECCE policy documents

World Research in ECCE-

One only needs to read the following research documents to prepare a strong policy document and create awareness among all stakeholders in ECCE.

- From Neurons to Neighborhoods (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000),
- Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children (Carnegie Corporation, 1994),
- the Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study (McCain & Mustard, 1999),
- Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD,2001), and the
- the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Australian Background Report (Press & Hayes, 2000), to refocus interest in the role of early childhood programs to optimize child wellbeing, transition to school and later schooling outcomes.

Fees –

World over most countries subsidize the fees for early care and education. In India, the state instead of taking a strong role and responsibility in helping parents with the costs of early care and education is asking centers to curb their fees without having a calculation of costs involved. So centers are cutting costs on essentials like teacher salaries, ongoing assessments, ongoing teacher training and learning aids. This is leading to low grade early childhood programs that harm more than help. Around the world,

Families ineligible for child care subsidies and/or whose children attend non-government preschools or kindergartens usually pay substantial fees for these childhood services. In New South Wales for example, fees in preschools not attached to Public schools start at about \$30 to \$40 per day. Child care centre fees start at about \$60 to \$70 per day. Before-and-after-school care fees start at about \$20 per day. The government does not dictate the fees of private set ups and a note worthy initiative by the People's action Party of Singapore is setting up of free/subsidized preschools for the average/poor in Singapore.

Do our policy makers understand the importance of investing in early childhood care and education?

In America President Obama visited Kindergartens, spent time building blocks with kids and even addressed the teachers. President Obama's new initiative "Preschool for All" under which all four-year-olds in low- and moderate-income families will have access to high-quality pre-kindergarten programs has furthered their commitment that they would rather invest in preschools than in prisons. - "We just might have a rare chance in the next couple of months to take steps toward such a landmark early childhood program in America. But children can't vote, and they have no highly paid lobbyist - so it'll happen only if we, the public, speak up."

In India, children are not the vote bank and so no one is worried about them till they turn 18 and are able to vote then all the political parties suddenly think about taking care of their health, education and do not realize that it is too late as many would have already been affected by lack of education, drug habits, juvenile issues, remedial needs etc.

So why is the world investing in early childhood?

World over countries benefit economically from investing in early childhood education and care, how? The major reported cost benefits of strong, responsive and early childhood intervention services are

1. Increased tax revenues and – higher employment rates, associated tax contributions.
2. Accompanying reductions in welfare expenditure- less reliance on unemployment or welfare benefits.
3. Mothers able to take advantage of preschool care are more likely to gain employment, thus further increasing tax revenue and decreasing welfare dependence.
4. Another area of reduced expenditure is in education for example, less grade repetition and fewer special education placements.
5. The final major area of reduced costs is in lower criminal justice system costs, including reduced arrest rates and court and detention expenses.

Teacher qualifications have been given the least importance in our ECE policy-

One of the non-negotiable given in the draft policy document is, 'Adequate trained staff should be appointed', what is adequate? And trained? Or should it be qualified, trained staff and a specific number should be outlined per class size? What is wrong with this statement- qualified early childhood teacher. Isn't it an oxymoron? A teacher has to be qualified!

Teacher qualification and base level salaries need to be defined other changes will fall into place- minimum qualification-minimum wages. Qualifications of child care (day care, crèche) and child education (kindergarten/preschool) to be different and defined.

Parent education is another ignored area in our draft policy-

Most children spend the first 3 years of their life with their parents before enrolling for any early childhood program and yet our policy document has very little stated for parent education-

So why is parent education important?

The evidence from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the United States of America bears this out, as does the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project in the United Kingdom. Both studies demonstrate the contributions that high-quality child care and preschool education, respectively, can make to children's language and cognitive development during the early years. In both studies, parent and family characteristics are, however, stronger determinants than the early childhood programs, per se. The combination of family and community, working in synergy, powerfully determines outcomes.

How can parent education about ECCE be achieved?-

In the Republic of Dominica, the Ministry of Education and Human resource Development sees parents as central stakeholders in ECD.

The Ministry of Education has the following commitment towards parents -

- Conduct ongoing public education on the value of ECD and access to licensed programmes and centers.
- expose young people to parenting information through the Health and Family Life Education programmes at schools and collaborate with other Ministries for example, Ministry of Health in providing parenting programmes
- Support the strengthening of the National Parenting Association to spearhead public and parent education and participation in Early Childhood Development.
- Co-opt relevant and qualified individuals to assist in the development and delivery of ECD parenting programmes.
- Encourage early childhood centers to actively engage parents in the understanding and support for ECD learning and development.

National curriculum framework-

What research base? Which educational philosophies and approaches will be combined to create our curriculum framework? There have been no research projects like the Perry Preschool Project (USA) to understand what would be the best combination of educational approaches that would work for Indian early childhood centers.

World over-

Some programs are closely linked to century-old traditions based on the ideas of Fredrick Froebel, Maria Montessori or Rudolf Steiner; others draw on more contemporary ideas such as those emerging from the Reggio Emilia region of Italy, now known as the 'Reggio' approach. But most early childhood programs follow an eclectic approach informed by Froebelian traditions and newer notions of 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice' first promoted by the US-based National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the early 1980s (NAEYC, 1982).

All the stakeholders in ECCE need to know who they are, what their role is, and what the goals for ECCE are. Without this clarity of purpose, early childhood risks being driven off course by the winds that periodically blow through the education establishment. More purposeful advocacy for early childhood care and education must articulate its historical strengths and potential contributions to children. The early years of every child are too important not to protect and nurture.