

Let us avert a Titanic in Early Childhood Care and Education.

Our theme this year is *'Sustaining Excellence In Early Childhood Education'*, we chose this as one of the most important aspects of achieving Quality Standards is the ability to sustain them in early childhood care and education projects. Excellence is not a goal to achieve and forget, but a mission to uphold everyday in every aspect.

I compare what is happening today in the early childhood sector to the Titanic because the Titanic sank when it ran into an iceberg and this tragedy lost lives, valuables, and trust of thousands of people as the Titanic was mounted as the most modern and safe cruise ship. Last year early childhood care and education in our country too has faced its share of icebergs, the past year has not been very good for early childhood care and education especially the big dent it has left on parents trust of branded and unbranded chains. Be it the chaos and stress that parents experienced because of the closing down of a branded chain of preschools or the severely dangerous incidents that happened in daycares and preschools leading to trauma, injury and even death in some cases.

When such instances occur we always blame it on external factors such as the lack of CCTV or for example- in the case of the famous preschool chain that left parents stranded blamed it on an investor! This means that just like the Titanic we assume we sink due to an 'external iceberg'. But did you know that it was not just an iceberg that sank the Titanic? Ongoing research from British journalist Senan Molony who has been investigating the Titanic history for the past 30 years, has evidence that proves that:

1. The real reason for it's sinking was a fire outbreak in the fuel tank bay of the ship, which happened before the Titanic took off on its journey.
2. The crew was trying to put out the fire for weeks, the owners had known about the fire and tried to hide it from passengers by turning the liner the other side of the shore so as not to make the soot marks visible.
3. Due to the fire the ships hull heated up to 1,000 degrees Celsius and when Titanic hit the iceberg the steel gave way with a huge gap. Under such extreme heat steel becomes fragile and loses 75% of its hardness.
4. The first mate of the ship was changed just before departure and due to lack of proper handing over process, the first mate forgot to give the key to the binocular box because of this the crew relied on their own eyes instead of a binocular and noticed the iceberg when it was already too late.
5. Despite warnings from other ships, Titanic did not slow down; if they had they would have been able to avert the fateful accident.

The Titanic was a grand ship; that built up hopes and celebrations for the sea cruise industry and then... disaster for so many. Just like it, early childhood care and education was celebrated especially the privately owned centers but now we are on the brink of sinking, as brands are faced with shut downs, due to safety issues and fall in trust of parents. Do we want to sink like the Titanic? Blaming it on external factors like the iceberg?

1. Just like the fire in the fuel tank of the Titanic, we too should be able to see and acknowledge that the lack of trained teachers and lack of real safety standards is the fire in our 'fuel tank' which will definitely sink us if not taken seriously.
2. Just like the owners of the Titanic knew about the fire and chose to hide it from passengers, aren't school owners too trying to hide their quality and safety flaws from the parents and instead trying to 'show their good side' to attract parents like investing in grand interiors and toys and neglecting the investment on staff training and curriculum?
3. For how long will the industry be able to take these deadly blows caused due to a handful of foolish owners who are allowed to run loose and spoil the hard work of the committed?
4. Constant attrition of staff at early childhood centers leads to lack of handover of children's assessment and brings about a continuity jerk in curriculum implementation that in turn hampers the development of young children at these centers.

5. Early Childhood Association has been warning the school owners and educators to come together and slow down and take cognizance of the fact that failing quality and standards in early childhood centers will lead to failure of the entire sector and cause grievous harm to all round development and safety of children.

At the Early Childhood Association we are worried about the future of early childhood care and education in our country. As it is we have no regulations defined by the government about safety, infrastructure, training and quality, which in turn makes school and daycare owners clueless about implementing this at their centers. Due to lack of parent education, parents are clueless about what to expect when they enroll their child to daycares, crèches, and preschools. This dual combination of lack of clarity leads to many brands and privately run preschools to break rules, and under invest in teacher salaries, core safety standards and curriculum thus leading to these kind of accidents which then send the state governments into a tizzy and leads to knee jerk reactions which are not thought through and are short term instead of long term, almost like appeasement to control the situation.

These knee jerk reactions till now have not looked into the core issues but have given 'so called solutions' like registering preschools with local authorities (how does that help? So paying 25,000 and kids are safe?) Or passing a child protection policy that states that centers should be in safe areas and to have cctv cameras (the Kharghar daycare where a child was beaten up by a caretaker had cctv cameras, did that deter the caretaker?) or bringing a new rule that preschools cannot run in residential areas! (So is a commercial area safe for young children? And the amount of time they will travel to reach these areas, is that good for them?). All these end up deterring the committed and passionate early childhood educator from setting up quality centers which in turn leads to more 'profiteering minded' people coming into this sector who will bribe their way through all these so called new laws and policies and end up giving low quality education and care to the children.

Quality is not a one time investment, it is an ongoing process, quality happens when centers invest in Sustaining Excellence In Early Childhood Education. Early Childhood Association proposes the following for all of us to do together to bring long lasting excellence in our services to parents and children.

1. Its time to for early childhood center owners be it branded, non branded to come together and define certain parameters that can be considered as 'non negotiable' for all.
2. Let us become our own regulators; let us define our quality standards based on achievable global standards.
3. Let us have a consultative meeting and decide what should be the common safety standards across all daycares and preschools in India. In these consultative meets let us also include the voices of parents and their participation.
4. Let us define the developmentally appropriate curriculum for all ages in the early years centers, so that a child in Delhi or Chennai is not being exposed to different learning expectations that are not in line with their age or stage of development.
5. Let us raise our voice and insist that we will be consulted every time the government (center or state) decides to bring in new policies, regulations or laws concerning the care and education in the early years.

And we urge the government to do two things so that quality and safety for every child in India is upheld.

1. One nation- One Policy- Be it for starting preschools or curriculum or safety etc. there should be one common policy with defined non-negotiable for every state to follow. States can then add relevant cultural or area specific points.
2. Consultative process before defining policies, laws and regulations- government should involve important stakeholders before defining laws or policies, involve associations like us as we know the ground reality of how and what needs to and can be implemented.

Come join us at the Early Childhood Association and create better care and learning environments for our young children and stop our sector from sinking like the Titanic.