



Early Childhood Education – Possibilities for the way forward

Venita Kaul

Introduction

The National Policy on Education (1986) has acknowledged Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children below 6 years to be not only the first step in the Education ladder, but also a significant input for primary education. ECCE as a stage of education is now globally being considered as extending up to 8 years, since from the child development perspective, children in the 6 to 8 age group are known to be similar in their needs and characteristics to the younger age group and require similar pedagogical approaches. ECCE is visualised as an integrated, holistic programme for children which includes provisions of education, care, health and nutrition. Within this ECCE stage, three sub stages have been identified --- (a) Early Stimulation stage for children 3 years and below, who require home based stimulating environments and care; (b) Early Childhood Education stage for children between 3 to 6 years requiring a holistic centre - based early childhood education programme and (c) Early Primary stage for children between 6 to 8 years, corresponding to grades 1 and 2.

There is now adequate empirical evidence from research in neuroscience, economics and education, globally and within the country, to prove that participation in pre-school education not only has lifelong impact, but also in more immediate terms, has a positive effect on children's retention, attendance and performance at the primary stage. It is further established that school readiness experiences facilitate adjustment and learning in the primary grades, particularly in the context of EFA, wherein diverse groups of first generation learners are coming into the school system without adequate linguistic and cognitive preparedness. Early childhood education thus contributes significantly not only to providing the child a sound foundation for life in these critical years, but also in the attainment of the primary education goals. It

can therefore serve as a very effective investment for realizing the vision of the RTE.

Early Childhood Education has two major objectives--(i) to promote all round development of children through an age/developmentally appropriate programme of play based activities, interactions and experiences which will provide a sound foundation for lifelong learning and development and (ii) to develop in children school readiness through some specific kinds of concept and skill based activities which will foster readiness for learning of the 3R's, prior to entry to primary schooling. It is not a programme for formal teaching of the 3 R's. The school readiness objective is particularly appropriate for children between the ages of four to six years, because by this age children are maturationally ready for a more structured, yet play based, learning environment.

Early Childhood Education in the XI Five Year Plan (FYP)

There have been some significant developments in the course of the XI FYP, which have implications for Early Childhood Education. In 2006, at the policy level, the subject of ECCE in the Business Allocation Rules was shifted in GOI from MHRD to MWCD. Subsequently, a major landmark in the last few years has been the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, (RTE 2009), which came into effect from 1st April, 2010. Although this Act presently excludes children below six years, it also specifies under its Section 11 that, "*with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide ECCE, appropriate Government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre - school education for such children*". ECCE has also subsequently been included as a constitutional provision through the amended Article 45, which now reads as follows: "*The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the*



age of six years". These developments have to an extent highlighted the emerging significance of ECCE and, within it, of pre-school education, as the foundation for children's education and development.

Current Status of Early Childhood Education in India

A major landmark in the area of ECCE has been the approval of the recent National Policy on ECCE which was notified in September, 2013 by the ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. The policy is accompanied by a National Curriculum Framework and Quality Standards for ECCE. These policy level initiatives raise hope and optimism for the expansion and quality control in this sector.

Over the course of the XI FYP there has been a quantum jump in pre-school enrolment from 21 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010). More recent ASER data (2010) indicates that 83.6 percent of 3 to 6 year olds in the rural areas are enrolled in some or the other preschool programme, including in the private pre-schools. While data reliability may be an issue with all sources, the progress is distinctly evident. To some extent this may be attributed to the rapid expansion of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and its universalization and alongside to the rapidly expanding private provisions, even in tribal and rural areas across many states. A recent study by Center for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi and ASER Center in Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Rajasthan has demonstrated that an anganwadi was found in every village visited, while private pre-school provisions were also expanding by leaps and bounds. (IECEI, 2013)

In terms of coverage, provisions for centre based Early Childhood Education in India are available through three distinct channels i.e. public, private and voluntary sectors. Under the public sector the major programme is the ICDS, for which the nodal Ministry is MWCD. Early childhood education which is one of its six services, is characteristically very minimalist in terms of quality of both content and facilities and is considered across states as its weakest component. The programme is currently reaching out to more than 73 million children below six years of age through its network of nearly 12 lakh

AWCs. In addition to these, under the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme, 22038 crèches have been sanctioned by the Government of India. (MWCD 2011) which, in some cases, provide pre-school education too in addition to custodial care. SSA also supports 14, 235 ECE centres in non-ICDS areas which cover approximately 48,6605 children across the country in addition to another 4367 ECCE centres in Educationally Backward Blocks covering 92,523 children under the NPEGEL programme. (NPEGEL Progress Report, June 2011). SSA has also been funding some quality strengthening initiatives like training of AW workers, provision of materials etc.

Although no reliable estimates are available, recent rapid surveys indicate that the private sector is steadily expanding and penetrating even into the rural and tribal areas as a provider of pre-school education (AUD, 2011). As per ASER survey of 2010, 11.4% of children residing in rural areas are on an average receiving pre-primary education from private initiatives, which in some states may be considerably higher. Surveys indicate that these low fee charging private pre-schools are in most cases characterized by serious inadequacies like overcrowded class rooms and developmentally inappropriate curricula, which can even be detrimental for children. (CECED, 2013) Apart from private ventures, there are national and local NGO initiatives which get financial assistance from grant-in-aid schemes of the government and national and international aid agencies. There is no reliable data on the coverage of this sector.

Analysis of Issues in Early Childhood Education

While enrolments have increased over the years in ECE, issues of quality, equity and capacity continue to be significant. The overriding concern is that a large number of children may be coming into primary schools, without attending pre-school, or attending but not getting adequate preparation for the primary curriculum in terms of school readiness. This situation invites an analysis of what are the issues that have led to this status of early childhood education in the country, despite several policy and programmatic provisions. Some significant issues are as follows:

- (a) Lack of appreciation in the public sector of the need for age appropriate interventions for children within each sub stage of early

childhood in terms of their growing needs and capacities and the tendency in public and voluntary sectors to address the 3 to 6 year olds as one common level.

- (b) Inadequate priority to early childhood education in ICDS, resulting in its perception universally as a nutrition programme and significant challenges in its due to a single untrained and overworked worker required to deliver on multi-sectoral components requiring completely diverse skills, with poor infrastructural facilities and resources.
- (c) Shifts in parental aspirations towards English medium private pre-schools, evident in steady migration even in rural and tribal areas, of 4 to 5 year olds from the AWs to the private pre-schools, or in some cases primary schools due to the mid-day meal programme. Some state governments like Nagaland, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, at their own initiative, have added pre-school classes to the primary schools to counter/meet this spiralling community demand.
- (d) Absence of any guidelines, resource materials or standards of quality till recently in Early childhood Education which has led to a minimalist approach in public sector programmes and a laissez faire situation in private sector provisions, with developmentally inappropriate practices by way of down ward extension of primary education. Both scenarios can be counter-productive and detrimental for children's development and education.
- (e) Lack of institutional capacity in early childhood education, particularly at the state, district and sub district levels to plan, implement, support or monitor the provisions.
- (f) Linked to institutional capacity is the complete absence of any MIS or data base on ECCE which could support the planning or evaluation process.

A major factor responsible for these issues persisting is that there has so far been no centrally sponsored scheme and dedicated funding for early childhood education which could have addressed many of the systemic concerns discussed above holistically. In the context of Early Childhood education, the NAC has made a recommendation

that children up to 4 years could be provided ECCE experiences through the ICDS in the AW with an additional worker, and a year of pre-primary class be attached to every primary school to ensure school readiness for all children. If the age for Grade 1 gets raised to six years in all states as per the RTE, this would amount to 2 years of school based early childhood education which, if adequately provided for, could contribute significantly to a sound foundation for learning for all children.

Suggestions for the way forward

In view of the above considerations, a major shift proposed in the XII FYP has been to extend the RTE entitlements downwards to include the early childhood stage of education. In addition it is also recommended that early childhood education for 4 to 6 year olds should be brought into the fold of primary education or integrated in a 'bottom up' not 'top down' mode with it as a school readiness programme for children, prior to their entering grade 1. However, this proposal is currently become dormant and needs to see the light of the day.

Further to this some suggestions that may be considered are as follows:

1. All States need to be encouraged to fix the age of entry to Grade 1 uniformly at 6 years to align with the RTE stipulation, so that in the 23 states which have the entry age at present at 5 years, the 5 year olds will be placed in an early childhood education centre/class for school readiness. As per recent ASER survey (2010) over 60 percent of five year olds are in primary schools and not in AWs across the country in the rural sector.
2. Anganwadi Centres need to be upgraded into Early Childhood Care and Education centres in line with the new policy, with basic infrastructure, professional training of a dedicated worker in ECCE and age appropriate early stimulation and education curriculum and materials for children below 4 years, which is the most critical age for brain development.
3. Every primary school needs to have a pre-primary section for 4 to 6 year olds for which adequate resources need to be apportioned to be able to provide a sound developmentally appropriate school readiness programme of acceptable quality to children. It may be noted that school readiness does not imply teaching of the 3 R's at the pre-school stage. This practice of

extending the primary curriculum downwards has been found to be very detrimental for children's learning and development. Instead, school readiness refers to certain cognitive, linguistic concepts and skills as well as a positive disposition towards learning, which through play and activity prepares the child to learn the 3 R's more effectively later in the primary grades.

4. The concept of an 'Early learning unit' should be introduced which would bring together the pre-primary and early primary grades into an integrated unit, to allow for planned 'bottom up' continuity in curriculum (which should be developmentally appropriate, non-formal and play-based) as well as allow for flexibility to promote individually paced learning, thus contributing to a sound foundation for every child. Learnings from good practices from within and outside the country related to this concept e.g. Activity-Based Learning programme, Nali-Kali etc. will inform this curricular shift. This shift is not envisaged as requiring any structural or administrative changes in the school system; instead it will focus primarily on shifts in curriculum and pedagogy with introduction of graded materials and related teacher preparation and support.
5. The NCTE model curriculum for Diploma in ECE teacher education already reflects this integrated concept as it covers teacher preparation for both pre-school and grades 1 and 2 in its scope. This should be further

reviewed, strengthened and customised to support the early learning unit concept and to ensure appropriate teacher preparation. NCTE will need to lay down standard qualifications and adapt its TET guidelines to accommodate the teachers of this Early Learning Stage i.e. pre-primary and Grades 1 and 2. States will need to be encouraged to modify their recruitment rules for teachers so that they appoint the graduates of this Diploma as teachers for the Early Learning Stage i.e., Pre-school and Grades 1 and 2.

6. A system of regulation of quality of pre-schools across the public, private and voluntary sectors will be required to be instituted along with a strong advocacy component for all stakeholders to correct the current misconceptions regarding quality of education and ensure all children get equitable and developmentally appropriate pre-school education.

While children will be supported to become ready for school, schools will also need to be made ready for children by being made more child friendly with dedicated and trained teachers and stimulating play and learning materials and classrooms for the early grades. Simultaneously, the resource capacities at the higher institutional levels will also have to be strengthened in Early Childhood Education, particularly at district and block levels, through partnerships with civil society organizations and professionals to ensure regular on-going resource support and wider community participation.



Venita Kaul has a doctorate in Psychology from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. She is currently Professor and Director, School of Education Studies and Center for Early Childhood Education and Development, Ambedkar University Delhi. As Director of the Center she has initiated and led a number of research and advocacy projects in the area of Early Childhood Education and Development. A significant research she is leading currently is a longitudinal study to explore immediate and medium term impact of quality variations in ECE on primary outcomes. Prior to this, she has been Senior Education Specialist in the World Bank and Professor and Head of Department of Pre-school and Elementary Education at the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). She can be contacted at vkaul54@gmail.com