



EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND SCHEMES IN INDIA

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Abstract

Early life is the ideal period for a child to grow and develop. During these years, the foundations of all learning are established. Having a strong foundation pays big long-term returns for society in the form of increased educational attainment and better school learning, which have a major positive social and economic impact. The Indian government primarily utilizes the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) platform to deliver preschool education. As a state-operated and centrally supported early childhood development program, this initiative provides preschool education through 1.37 million Anganwadi centers as part of its comprehensive suite of six fundamental services. During the formative years, before a child's enrollment in primary school, crucial elements for learning are established, such as immunizations, health evaluations, referrals, nutritional aid, growth tracking, and health and nutrition instruction. Engaging with children at a young age is the best approach to changing their lives. We learned about the importance of early childhood care and education policies, programs, and initiatives from secondary sources. The purpose of the present study was to analyze the concepts, characteristics, components, strategies, and objectives associated with early childhood care and education. Several service providers and challenges related to early childhood care and education were also identified.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)

Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is often considered a crucial component of universal education. As a result, nations have actively pursued it with great intensity. Following prolonged efforts, numerous nations are moving closer to achieving ECCE security (Chandra, et al. 2017). Since early childhood lays the groundwork for subsequent learning, it is a critical period for brain development. At this point, children's early experiences influence their brain development and form synaptic connections that serve as the foundation for language, reasoning, problem-solving, social skills, behavior, and emotional wellness (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). As a result, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2013)

predicted that "early years may be the optimum place to invest to improve learning results and sustain them in the long run." Achieving this aim can be facilitated by providing each child with exceptional Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). As per the Asia-Pacific End of Decade Notes on Education for All 2012, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development between birth and the age of eight." It encompasses intellectual stimulation, health care, physical, social, and emotional support, education, and nutrition. In addition, ECCE is seen to be crucial for achieving universal primary and secondary school enrollment, retention, and success. Josephine (2003) discovered a strong link between pre-primary schooling and primary school retention. Rao (2010) also stated that "children in higher quality ECCE centres had superior perceptual, memory, verbal, and numerical skills than children in lower quality ECCE centres, demonstrating that quality is related to child outcome measures." According (Woodhead, et al, 2009) "excellent ECCE is healthy for children's development, consistent with realizing their rights, and an important pro-poor strategy capable of enhancing equity".

Concept of Early Childhood Care and Education

During the initial eight years of life, a critical opportunity arises for a child's brain development and education. UNESCO emphasizes that readiness for primary school is merely one facet of comprehensive early childhood care and education (ECCE). Investing in early childhood care and education is among the most beneficial choices a nation can make, fostering gender equality, social cohesion, and comprehensive development. Additionally, it can act as the foundation for emotional wellness and lifelong learning. The early years represent a period of extraordinary growth, with major brain development and neuronal architecture, from conception until age five. Early infancy is a critical developmental time that shapes lifelong social production and involvement (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

According to the 2013 National Policy on ECCE states that early childhood development is divided into three sub-stages, each having a developmental focus that is age-specific.

These Sub-Stages are:

- From conception to birth
- From birth to three years,
- from three to six years

Significant of ECCE

Children gain a wide range of cognitive, socioemotional, physical-motor, and language skills during these years. Thus, it is important to provide them with a lively, interesting environment that is full of positive experiences so that they can grow. Quality early care and education provided to young children through ECCE programmes allow them to learn age-appropriate information and abilities, which aids in their adjustment to a formal school environment (National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2013). Hence, prioritizing early childhood care and education is essential for fostering children's integrated,

holistic, and robust development. All children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, must receive equitable and superior early childhood education from various ECCE service providers.

Characteristics of Early Childhood Care and Education

Age-appropriate pedagogies reflect a collection of desirable attributes that teachers might consider when working with children and colleagues to be responsive to each particular kid, situation, and purpose of learning (Queensland Government, 2019). According to the Queensland Government, there are some characteristics of early childhood care and education they are as follows:

Active: In all domains of learning, the active characteristic requires embodied and physical contact. Engaging in activities both indoors and outside is essential to enabling children to reach their maximum potential. As adolescents move, do, and interact in a variety of learning scenarios, their self-regulation, motivation, focus, and concentration all improve.

Agentic: Giving children a voice in their education is the goal of the agentic feature. Their ideas and passions inspire, encourage, and expand learning opportunities, enabling them to expand on their experiences and understandings of the real world.

Collaborative: Encouraging social interaction and joint efforts, children and educators work together persistently to explore learning methods and gain understanding collectively.

Creative: Encouraging curiosity and artistic expression, they foster exploration and inquiry to uncover novel perspectives and modes of thought.

Explicit: Making the connections between learning objectives, methods, and acquired skills transparent to both learners and educators, ensuring clarity in the learning process.

Language-Rich and Dialogic: Creating environments where rich language is embraced and utilized by children and educators alike, fostering meaningful dialogues to promote critical thinking, learning, and imaginative participation.

Learner-Focused: Acknowledging the diverse ways in which children learn and respecting their individual experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds across physical, intellectual, cultural, and social dimensions.

Narrative: Recognizing the significance of personal and shared stories in shaping understanding, actively engaging in the creation and comprehension of narratives, particularly through playful interactions.

Playful: Encouraging imaginative exploration and creativity, inviting children to connect and venture into different realms of thought and experience, and fostering freedom for the development of new ideas and possibilities.

Responsive: Remaining adaptable and attuned to the needs of children and the learning context, integrating structured and spontaneous activities, open-ended exploration, and tailored approaches to learning.

Scaffolding: Providing necessary support through modeling, encouragement, questioning, and feedback to enhance children's existing skills, gradually withdrawing assistance as they gain proficiency, and fostering active frameworks for new learning.

Objectives of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD, 2018) outlines the fundamental goals of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as follows:

1. Fostering the holistic development of each child to unlock their full potential and establish a strong foundation for lifelong learning.
2. Promoting collaboration between parents, households, communities, and ECCE centers to ensure the well-being of children.
3. Upholding principles to:
 - Foster a nurturing environment where every child feels valued, secure, and nurtured.
 - Support physical and motor skill development tailored to each child's abilities.
 - Cultivate healthy habits, including nutrition, hygiene, and self-care.
 - Facilitate effective communication skills, nurturing both receptive and expressive language abilities.
 - Stimulate sensory exploration and integration.
 - Cultivate intellectual curiosity through hands-on exploration and experimentation.
 - Foster social skills, emotional resilience, and overall well-being.
 - Encourage artistic expression and creativity.
 - Promote culturally sensitive behavior and essential human values like empathy and respect.
 - Ease the transition from home to ECCE centers and then to formal schooling.
 - Enhance opportunities for comprehensive personality development.

In essence, ECCE endeavors to create a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports the overall development and well-being of young children, laying the groundwork for their future success and fulfillment.

Policies and Initiatives Taken by the Indian Government

As per Article 39 of the Indian Constitution, the primary objective of the State's policy ought to be ensuring that children are provided with conditions of freedom and dignity, as well as opportunity and resources for healthy growth. Additionally, childhood and youth must be shielded from exploitation and material and moral abandonment. "Various interventions are carried out regularly at the national, state, and local levels to ensure the survival, health, nutrition, care, and education of young children in their early years (NIOS, 2019).

Table 1: Major goals and objectives of the policy

Sl. No	Year of Establishment	Name of the Policy	Major Goals and Objectives
1	1986	National Policy on Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic development • Implementing play-based, child-centered ECCE programs
2	1993	National Nutrition Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To raise each individual's nutritional status in the community.
3	2013	National Policy for Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rights and highest priorities of every child are participation, protection, education, health, nourishment, and survival.
4	2013	National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide opportunities for holistic development and active learning that are free, universal, inclusive, egalitarian, joyous, and contextualized to all children under the age of six in order to help them set the foundation and reach their maximum potential.
5	2013	National Health Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its goal is to provide everyone with fair, affordable, and excellent healthcare services.
6	2014	India Newborn Action Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This initiative aims to decrease avoidable infant mortality and stillbirths nationwide through deliberate intervention.
7	2016	National Plan of Action for Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting the "last child first" should be the main priority. • Children who are most at risk because of their gender, sociocultural background, economic status, or geographic isolation should be given priority.

8	2017	National Health Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To influence regional health systems, including those that deal with healthcare financing, service delivery, illness prevention, and wellness promotion.
9	2018	National Nutrition Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To guarantee optimal nutrition and holistic development for expectant moms, children, and other caregivers; To lower the rate of undernutrition.
10	2020	National Education Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To achieve optimal outcomes in the domains of early language and communication development, cognitive, socio-emotional-ethical, cultural/artistic, physical and motor, literacy, and numeracy.

Various policies in India, such as the National Policy on Education (1986), prioritize holistic development and emphasize Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The National Nutritional Policy (1993) targets undernutrition, while the National Policy for Children (NPC) focuses on children's rights. The National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013) aims for quality ECCE for all. Health initiatives like the National Health Mission (2013) and India Newborn Action Plan (2014) tackle healthcare access and newborn mortality. The National Health Policy (2017) aims for comprehensive health systems. POSHAN Abhiyan (2018) targets malnutrition. The National Education Policy (2020) stresses the importance of ECCE for healthy brain development.

Programmes and Schemes

The government has launched initiatives and actions to continuously address this need out of concern for the health and well-being of mothers and their children.

Table 2: Major goals and objectives of Programmes and schemes

Sl. No.	Year of Establishment	Name of the Programmes and Scheme	Major Goals and Objectives
1	1975	Integrated Child Development Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It includes all children between the age of 0-6 years
2	1995	Mid-Day Meal Scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to enhance the children's nutritional condition.
3	2005	Janani Suraksha Yojana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage institutional delivery among low-income expectant mothers to lower maternal and newborn mortality.
4	2005	Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It requires early intervention and screening for children's health issues.
5	2009	Integrated Child Development Scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To create a safe environment for children.
6	2011	Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer cashless, totally free services to ill babies and expectant mothers.
7	2018	Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide inclusive, equitable, high-quality education to children from preschool to senior high school.

The Indian government launched the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme in 1975, catering to children aged 0-6 and expectant/nursing mothers. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, started in 1995, improves nutrition for elementary school students. Janani Suraksha Yojana (2005) incentivizes hospital deliveries for economically disadvantaged pregnant women. Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) prioritizes child health screening. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) aims for inclusive, quality education from preschool to class 12.

Curriculum Frameworks

Certain government entities have been tasked with planning and developing curricular frameworks to guide educational institutions in terms of curriculum content, methodology, and outcomes for a certain grade and

field of study.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) established the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005, offering a blueprint for curriculum design and instructional approaches utilized in India's school education initiatives. The framework supports early childhood education (ECCE) by promoting care, experiences, and opportunities that support a child's holistic development—that is, their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth. It advocates for an age-appropriate play-based curriculum in ECCE and sees it as a training ground for formal education.

National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum Framework, 2013

The National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework of 2013 represents a comprehensive and pivotal set of guidelines. It aims to foster excellence and enhance the quality of early childhood education and care nationwide. It aims to provide all children from birth through pre-primary school with rich early stimulation and quality learning opportunities. It promotes the entire development and learning of children. It aims to establish a supportive atmosphere and offer needs-based resources according to the developmental and contextual requirements of children. The Framework also recognizes the importance of parental, family, and community involvement in ensuring quality ECCE (MWCD, 2013).

National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE)

A National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) for children up to the age of 8 will be developed by NCERT in two parts, namely, a sub-framework for 0–3-year-olds, and a sub-framework for 3–8-year-olds, aligned with the above guidelines, the latest research on ECCE, and national and international best practices (NEP, 2020).

Various Service Providers of ECCE

To address the diverse demands for ECCE, numerous organisations in the government, private, and non-governmental sectors offer ECCE programmes.

Government Organizations

In India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) is essential to ECCE efforts. Implementing "Anganwadi" ECCE centers. Since 1975, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has been providing free integrated child development services (ICDS), encompassing health, nutrition, and education, to children residing in rural regions, underdeveloped areas, slums, and minority communities. As of 2011, approximately 38 million individuals were registered in ICDS educational programs, with around 78 million enrolled in health and nutrition initiatives at Anganwadi centers, marking the largest enrollment globally (MWCD, 2011).

These include starting classes at the same time as elementary schools and establishing Anganwadi centers close to elementary schools. Furthermore, Anganwadi centers provide childcare and nutrition education to 18.4 million expectant or nursing mothers, thereby alleviating the adverse impact of their compromised

health and limited literacy on the development of their unborn children. ICDS initiatives offered at Anganwadi centers have been highly commended for significantly aiding the development of infants afflicted by poor health and malnutrition. However, it has received some criticism for the fact that the main goals of ICDS are only children aged three to six, and those under three who want ICDS more urgently are likely to miss the majority of services, and it does not give enough educational substance (The World Bank, 2004).

Private Organizations

In India, parents usually consider that private schools offering instruction mostly in English receive a better quality of education than those offering instruction in regional tongues. Public schools taught in English are reportedly attended by some underprivileged kids whose parents can afford the tuition. Unlike primary and secondary education, government regulations or standardization are not enforced for ECCE programs. Consequently, there exists a notable discrepancy in the approaches adopted by ECCE providers concerning curriculum, educational standards, and instructor credentials. The bulk of ECCE programs provided by private educational institutions are unofficial education programs that are not supervised or instructed by the government, and they are gradually expanding as parents' interest in ECCE grows, (Ohara, 2013).

Non-Government Organizations

Individuals, religious organizations, and commercial enterprises establish and administer non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India. As part of their efforts to assist the socially disadvantaged, these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer ECCE programs. According to government estimates, between 3 and 20 million children participate in ECCE programmes supplied by non-governmental organizations, (Kaul and Sankara, 2009). One of the NGOs is Pratham, which functions as a professional ECCE organization. It prepares 90,000 children for elementary school throughout 12 Indian states, conducts surveys and research on ECCE, and trains Anganwadi teachers.

Effectiveness of Policies, Programmes and Schemes

UNICEF highlights the critical importance of the 0 to 8 age range in a child's development, highlighting its profound impact on future educational attainment and societal contributions. High-quality early learning and childhood development programs have been shown to improve academic performance and reduce dropout rates. In India, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program, operating through 1.37 million Anganwadi centers, serves as the primary provider of preschool education, alongside essential health and nutritional services. While around eight out of ten children aged three to six are enrolled in early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs, participation rates vary across states, with Karnataka having the highest rate at 86.6% and Uttar Pradesh the lowest at 43.7%. The private sector plays a significant role in ECCE provision, particularly in urban areas, with a majority of children from wealthier families attending private schools.

In July 2020, the Ministry of Education released the new National Education Policy, which includes ECCE and starts schooling at age three. "Universal providing of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be realized as soon as practicable, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all pupils entering Grade 1 are school ready," the declaration states.

Following SDG 4, Target 4.2, as well as the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy, the focus lies on advocating for inclusive and fair development opportunities for children aged 3 to 6. UNICEF's primary focus is on enhancing systems to ensure the delivery of top-tier early childhood care and education (ECCE) services. Help with school readiness (in all three areas) would be required for this. Find out more about how to promote learning at home and make children ready for school, as well as the shift from early childhood education to elementary school, and how to help children become ready for school. UNICEF will assist in putting NEP 2020 recommendations into practice to enhance children's access to high-quality foundational education starting in pre-primary school. This will involve working with NCERT, the private sector, and civil society to revise and develop an early childhood education curriculum and school readiness program.

Major Issues and Challenges in Quality Reforms in ECCE

The results reveal significant concerns and challenges regarding the personal lives of ECCE officials and the government's implementation of non-negotiable quality requirements, serving as a disincentive to improving ECCE quality across all areas (Chandra, et al. 2017). The following four categories are used to categorize the ensuing concerns and obstacles for ease of understanding:

Teaching and learning

Insufficient teaching and learning resources, improper instructional methods, and ineffective evaluation practices are the primary obstacles to improving the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Here Certain obstacles within them make it harder. They are as follows:

- Inadequate interaction and a high teacher-to-child ratio.
- Insufficient use of Teaching Learning Material (TLM).
- Inadequate teaching and learning process.
- Inadequate assessment and outcome measures.

Infrastructure and physical facilities

Most government ECCE centers have inadequate infrastructure and physical facilities, according to reports (NIPCCD, 2014). Their buildings were seen to be in disrepair. Moreover, nearly all ECCE centers in various states suffer from inadequate provisions such as insufficient lighting, ventilation, space for both indoor and outdoor activities, safety measures, access to electricity, cooking facilities, storage capacity, restroom facilities, and provision of clean and safe drinking water.

Health facilities

sleeping facilities (Planning Commission, 2013b); lack of coordination between ICDS and the Health Department.

Management of ECCE programmes and centres

If some crucial management issues are not successfully resolved, the standard of ECCE may suffer. These include a lack of training for ECE functionaries, a low level of training (NIPCCD, 2010d), a lack of on-the-job/refresher training, a lack of training centers, non-deputation of teachers for training, a lack of teacher involvement in the development of preschool curriculum (CECED, 2010), vacant posts, a low salary for ECCE functionaries, a heavy workload, a lack of proper monitoring mechanisms, and a lack of research. Recognizing these disparities in human development services, the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (2016, p. ix) stated, "we must promptly address the substantial inequalities of opportunity in education, health, and other sectors."

Conclusion

The Indian government has launched numerous initiatives and policies aimed at ensuring that every child across the nation receives top-tier early childhood care and education. These measures are designed to improve the quality of care, education, nutrition, and health for young children in their formative years. The central issue for a country like India, which has a large child population, is to guarantee that they receive good education and ample opportunities to develop their potential and contribute to the nation's success on all levels. The country presently has well-intended ECCE policies and programmes in place. However, the significant gap between policy and programme implementation is cause for severe concern. It is not enough to simply provide services. Universal access, private sector control, and other claims necessitate efficient methods for service delivery and monitoring. Unless the quality elements of these programmes are ensured, they are unlikely to have an impact on children's situations. To overcome this issue, all concerned parents, ECCE employees, policymakers, and specialists must become informed stakeholders in the venture.

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