

**EARLY LEARNING AND HOLISTIC
DEVELOPMENT:
Challenges, Prospects and Way Forward**

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Early learning and holistic development: Challenges, prospects and way forward

Report on the status of the young child Mobile Creches

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Abstract

Human infants need of care and protection from adults for their survival. This dependence is also seen by social scientists as an opportunity for the formation of emotional attachments, and the foundation of social relationships, language, cultural and cognitive learning. Thus, the early years are important for development during which a child's care, comfort, security and experiences are matters of concern. Throughout history and across cultures, human social groups have provided for child-care, albeit in a variety of different ways. A close analysis of these differences demonstrates that methods of caring cannot be narrowly defined, and that diversity is a key feature of human social practices and cultural membership as well as of our natural world. As an illustration of this, it is important to note that most of us are positively predisposed towards our childhood cultural experiences.

Although family members are the primary carers of young children, the support of others has been beneficial for the main carer, often the mother and the child. In modern times, society and State aid families through the provision of goods and services for the care of children. Within the family, who will care for the child and how, is guided by cultural traditions, situational constraints and personal disposition. Cultural practices provide children with a meaningful orientation to the environment, loaded with beliefs and values. This dimension of culture for childhood cannot be underestimated and for children in India, it is a fundamental right as provided under the Constitution. Despite existing provisions for support, many children live through difficult

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circumstances and support from Governmental and Non-governmental agencies becomes even more important.

Early childhood education and care for the very young supplements and even substitutes caregivers (when there is need), especially for employed mothers. Among migrant populations for instance, the absence of substitute caregivers leave young children vulnerable when parents go out to work. In such circumstances, older siblings may be compelled to drop out of school to care for infants. Safety and well-being of children growing up in such circumstances is a matter of immediate and urgent concern for families, communities, the Governmental and Non-governmental agencies. Although policy has been in place for decades, much more needs to be done in practice to ensure the well-being of all young children in and outside the family. Recent structural changes in family life require concerted efforts to ensure that no child is left unattended, that children find opportunity to attend school, and that a mother can leave her child in a safe and secure environment if she goes to work.

The task of the chapter is to take stock of the status of young children in India for identifying the requirement, availability, access and utilisation of basic services for the young child. In doing so, we will attempt to answer the question: Where do we stand in our commitment towards children. This review will focus firmly on identifying the way forward in planning for children and families through key recommendations for implementation of basic services for all children under six years of age. A specific examination of good practices in services for early childhood will assist in the preparation of recommendations for reaching that last mile of connectivity for children in need of care.

Background and history

Human infants are altricial² rather than precocial³, in need of care and protection from adults for their survival. This dependence is also seen as an opportunity for the formation of emotional attachments, and the foundation of social relationships, language, cultural and cognitive learning. Thus, the early years are important for development during which a child's care, comfort, security and experiences are matters of important concern. Throughout history and across cultures, social groups have provided for child-care in a variety of different ways that cannot be narrowly defined. Diversity is a key feature of human social practices and cultural membership. The differences also reflect the close adaptation of care arrangements to ecological conditions and social history.

² born in an undeveloped state and requiring care and feeding by the parents, contrasted with precocial

³ Born in a relatively advanced state

Furthermore, as members of any community, with few exceptions, we are affectionately predisposed towards our own childhood cultural experiences.

Many children in the Global South live amid conditions of poverty, sometimes bordering on destitution. In India, this covers almost one third of the country's children as recent estimates have reported. The matter is of acute importance for social scientists, activists, welfare agencies, policy makers and local populations. The history of children's development in India has shown a unique blend of traditional and new age practices; of abundance and deprivation, and of resilience and vulnerability. The social mosaic of patriarchy, as also traditional approaches to the protection of women and nurturance of the health of the new mother, have often been interlocked, creating a challenging environment for young babies and their mothers to thrive in. Though Indian society nurtures childhood and its glory at an ideological level, real-life experiences can be contrary. There has been a need for the State to intervene to ensure holistic developmental outcomes in the early years, which is only partially fulfilled. Government efforts notwithstanding, social activism and social work have been the hallmarks of success in this domain. Gender sensitization, early childhood education, mid-day meal services and the creation of inclusive programmes for children with disabilities are examples of some successes. There is still a long way to go; considering global standards in early childhood care and education, as well as the fundamental rights of individual children. However, we need to proceed with caution. For centuries, young children have been cared for in the folds of family life, protected and nourished by family members. Any step to change that enduring pattern on a large scale before the child is fully prepared for independent functioning for regular periods of time every day, needs to ensure that the basic needs of the child are fulfilled and conditions which we have arranged provide a safe, secure, supportive, stimulating, clean, nourishing, entertaining, and culturally familiar opportunities to children. **Anything short of this will make the young child more vulnerable than she may have been at home, with the family.** Unless we ensure that good quality services are provided, maybe we need to leave the child with their family, to be loved and cared for as the family is able. The conditions of care we provide to children will in some instances be better than those their families can provide and in other instances, not. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to plan centres with few resources for children of the poor, but if ECCE is to have the magical impact that is claimed, the services provided, the quality of interaction with the teachers and the learning opportunities have to be of the highest quality. Only then can we justify moving children out of their homes and into schools at an early age.

Reviewing ECCE: Global standards and cultural diversity

Reviewing the situation of child development practices and programs, there is a need to strongly represent developmentally assistive and healthy beliefs and practices. Research with indigenous communities highlights these practices, giving direction to the continually evolving child development policy framework. It is accepted that there are some traditional practices that may be harmful and traditional wisdom may be found wanting. At the same time, there is much in conventional practices that is valuable, which we must make a concerted effort to retain, both for favourable developmental outcomes and for culturally meaningful experiences of childhood and family life. Child care practices like food, clothing, sleeping arrangements, and others are historically adapted to ecological settings, and interventions in the ways in which people bring up children must be approached with great sensitivity and caution. The instance of introducing supplementary feeding for the young infant early has been recently rejected by scientific studies after playing havoc with practices related to breast feeding. On the other hand, the expulsion of the first excretions of breast-milk as impure, a local belief in some communities, has been rightly attended to with support the support of studies that prove its effectiveness in providing immunity to young children. Thus the task of promoting ECCE is a challenging and nuanced enterprise that needs to be approached with caution so that we don't land up throwing the baby out with the bath-water, so to speak.

What every society recognizes and every family attempts to provide

Every social group recognizes the impact of early experiences, and consequently, realises the importance of children's early learning and provisions of basic needs. This is done to ensure survival, development and integration into society (Evans, 2000). The ways in which this recognition is acted upon varies with every social group, in fact even between and within families. Education of children was historically the responsibility of the family, although some societies had formalized institutions for imparting skills and knowledge to children during and after middle childhood. Children were nurtured within the family and very few institutions for young children were available outside of this. In the first institutions that were founded for the care of orphaned and abandoned children were far from adequate for their needs. Residential care in institutions continues to be prone to the phenomenon of 'institutionalisation' and a place where care and protection is often found to be compromised⁴. The phenomenon of institutionalisation in residential homes, orphanages and children's homes studied in Eastern Europe were the first to identify the delay in children's development and the

⁴ See recent reports of abuse discovered among institutions for children
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/child-shelter-home-muzaffarpur-deoria-home-sexual-abuse-maneka-gandhi-juvenile-justice-act-5298332/>

unfavourable circumstances in which children were kept in these early institutions. Foster care has been another option, but there is a host of difficulties with that system as well.

Perhaps it would not be wrong to accept that the family (in all its varied manifestations) is the most effective institution for the care of young children (McCall, 2013). Based on all the research available, and with the disclaimer that families themselves may sometimes be unfavourable towards children, one can still argue that family care is the best option for young children. The Indian family, in all its various forms, sustains through traditionally guided patterns that provide children a good start. Some adults and some children may need assistance in this task on account of difficult circumstances, but keeping the young child living with the family is almost always the best option. It is from this basic assumption that all the forthcoming discussion of ECCE will proceed, a fact that we sometimes tend to undermine in our commitment to the best interests of children. Support for the young child must be provided within the context of family life as its base, and not outside of it.

Ideological foundations of ECCE

In order to best prepare for a future-oriented plan for ECCE, it is essential to examine its history. Early Childhood Education is an institutionalized format for young children's learning that is actively negotiated through specific guiding principles related to structure and activity. These principles are largely based on European and North American culture (Nsamenang, 2007). This version of the guided interactions between children and adults that is positioned as universal, has a circumscribed history, namely, a specific outlook on women's work, family circumstances and the ecological conditions in which children grow. Despite the claim of embracing diversity of childhood settings, the background of ECCE emerges from a specific cultural version of childhood experiences and learning outcomes. We must approach the task of ECCE services from a standpoint of a particular community rather than from the global for several reasons.

As it was envisaged in the first of the EFA goal, Expand Early Childhood Education, the primary objective of ECCE is to attain the enrolment of children in primary school and to strengthen the likelihood of school retention (UNESCO, 2000). The goal was clearly future-oriented. ECCE was established to invite the young child into a long-term commitment to schooling. Furthermore, ECCE is assumed to be an important strategy for a battle against poverty (Arnold, 2004). The claims of benefits from ECCE have been emphasized and asserted so often that questions about the ideology or methods of any research are seen as outrageous. Repeatedly, one reads about the magical

consequences of ECCE and its impact on children's development, performance and school enrolment. In fact, one of the most reliable indicators of the success is primary school enrolment, whereas developmental outcomes are far more difficult to determine given the nature of the research possibilities. Scientific and ethical constraints prevent us from experimenting with the lives of children in order to find firm answers about developmental outcomes.

ECCE as developmentally appropriate: Montessori, Froebel, Piaget and Vygotsky

ECCE has been promoted as a favourable and desirable experience for all children, whatever their background. The arguments are based on the fact that the structured and organized efforts by trained professionals can provide the child with experiences that are best understood and provided by educators trained in understanding children's developmental needs and learning processes. Montessori, Froebel, Piaget and Vygotsky are some of the most significant theorists whose ideas about development have influenced educational institutions the world over.

The term kindergarten is associated with the German educationist Froebel, whose attention to children's unique abilities and needs was path breaking in the early 1800s. Piaget and Vygotsky, although their theories had some important differences related to the role of language and the significance of a teacher, placed a great deal on children's experiences. They focused on the importance of developmentally appropriate activities and children's capacities for learning.

Play is an element of good quality preschools rests on the assumption that playing with manufactured toys is more favourable for children than play with the natural environment. This is beautifully articulated by Maria Montessori in 'The Secret of Childhood'. Emphasizing the natural desire for children to learn, she remarked that as the child begins to explore, adults begin to hinder that progress. Children also learn to interact with adults and children other than the intimate family group. The provision of play materials specifically designed to facilitate learning and the development of skills to adjust to extra-familial environments is another important objective. By family is meant a very specific arrangement: couple (who are the parents) and their children. She believed that adults misunderstand children because they view them from their own reference point "as the child's creator" (p. 10), whereas the child is a separate being. Education should not mean teaching but guidance of a child's development.

“Preparing children for school”: The future-oriented outlook of ECCE

Arrangements for fulfilling societal roles for the care of young children between birth and six years have evolved over centuries and remain varied across cultures, illustrating community structures and family practices as well as the social and economic roles of women and men. The formalization of informal care and learning arrangements emerged in the nineteenth century with the establishment of kindergartens and nursery schools for educational purposes first in Europe and North America.

There is also an argument to start with ‘high quality’ early that preschools (especially private ones) adopt to attract clients. The argument forwarded is that in order for the child to ‘become brilliant’ parents should invest in their programme early as can be seen in the names of these private schools in top cities: Genius Brain Kids⁵, Naughty Genius⁶ or Trainings Tree Preschool that promotes itself as Genius Kids’ Preschool⁷! The prevalence and popularity of such teaching shops cannot be discounted.

ECCE as a solution to the cycle of poverty

The third theme has been to assume that world-wide, the poor need assistance in bringing up children on account of inadequate resources and incapability attributed to their dispositions. How poverty is defined and what counts as inadequate has been a problematic issue because of ecological, cultural, social and historical differences, but we will not go into that discussing here except to say that people's economic status cannot always be attributed to their ‘attitudes’ as is commonly assumed.

In modern times, ECCE is recognised internationally through the policy and programmes, best explained in the Care for Child Development⁸ package of UNICEF. The focus is on Care and stimulation for under twos and learning through play for children between two and six years of age. The objective of this package is clearly compensatory as the opening paragraph states:

*“Globally over 200 million children do not reach their developmental potential in the first 5 years of life because they live in poverty, and have poor health services, nutrition and psycho-social care. These disadvantaged children **do poorly in school and subsequently have low incomes, high fertility, high criminality, and provide poor care for their own children.** ...[H]ealth care encounters for women and young children are important opportunities to help strengthen families’ efforts*

⁵ <http://geniusbrainkids.org/>

⁶ <http://www.geniusn.com/>

⁷ <https://training.trainingstree.com/listings/genius-kids-pre-school/>

⁸ https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_68195.html

to promote children's early development and may represent a critical time when health professionals in developing countries can positively influence parents of young children to enable their development." (Emphasis ours, UNICEF, 2012, p. 1)

The automatic and sweeping connections that are made between poverty, fertility, **criminality** and poor quality child care is overstated if we scrutinize the available literature on poverty. After all, being poor is not just a matter of disposition in a country like ours, there are historical, regional, structural and social factors behind specific regions being poor, and it is not like all poor are doomed to stay that way as the culture of poverty arguments of the seventies presumed (Lewis, 1969). Our contemporary understanding of poverty dynamics is profoundly different from that approach (Culture of poverty) (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Singh, 2015) and we need urgently to abandon notions of automatic labelling if we are to find ways to work towards its alleviation and provide people the dignity they deserve. By doing otherwise, we place a double load on the poor. First is the reality of their lives and second, the claims we make about their inability to get out of it except for the miraculous and magical impact of interventions. This is not a good position to start from.

Having said that, we do not deny that families, and more so children and women, living in difficult circumstances can benefit from intervention programmes; and ECCE services are an effective, early and favourable opportunity to offer this support. But this must be accomplished with respect for participants, and a humane attitude towards their conditions. Success stories of the outcomes of good quality ECCE services have demonstrated improvements in entry and success with schooling: high quality programs delivered with higher intensity and over a longer duration are most effective (Baker-Henningham & Bo, 2010).

ECCE and women's work

Another rationale for institutional care of children outside the home during the early years comes from a different direction, women's right to seeking employment. In India, this connection is exemplified by the establishment of FORCES⁹, the Forum for Creches and child care services. This forum was established in 1989 following the Shramshakti report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (1987). The report highlighted that the situation of women's work in the informal sector was significant and needed to be supported by the Government and non-Government agencies. Hitherto unrecognized and invisible, the economic contribution of these women was found to be significant, for which there was no legal or social support. It was argued that women needed recognition for their work and

⁹ <http://www.forces.org.in/>

support services like loans and banking. The care of children was one of the key areas of support. This intimate connection between the care and development of the young child and women's work was identified as early as 1989 in discussions between the team members of Mobile Crèches¹⁰ as they began to expand their outreach to policy, law and programmes. The NGO was a co-founder of FORCES. Child care centres were needed not only because children needed stimulation and learning opportunities, their mothers needed to be free to work with the knowledge that their children were being cared for in a safe environment, it was a matter of social justice. FORCES is a national network of organisations established for promoting the establishment of child care services with a focus on the needs of "poor working women and strongly argued for a national commitment to child care services". The network functions as a pressure group for services for young children and working women. The lives of young children and women is inextricably linked in the context of early childhood education. In the objective of the FORCES, for instance, the one becomes synonymous with the other. The question remains whether, in the absence of women's employment outside the home and the non-availability of substitute caregivers, is ECCE still a need?

When women leave the home to work, they need support for the care of their children. In large families, care is available from multiple members, both men and women. In rural families, for instance, multiple caregiving and large family networks have permitted the freedom of movement for women between the household, cattle and farm. These multigenerational households also provide children the opportunity to be with other children and learn from them. The care of children is a collective responsibility and it is sometimes difficult to identify who the 'mother' of the child is, during field-work (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2018). The significance of care of children of working parents then becomes intensified in the absence of large family support and multiple caregiving due to the lack of availability of others.

Relevance of ECCE: Summing up

Over the decades since its emergence, ECCE has become accepted as an eventuality and it is important to periodically revisit the original ideas behind its assumed relevance in global and local policy for young children. These are the four main points that have been extracted from our reviews:

1. ECCE as **developmentally appropriate activity** based on developmental needs and learning patterns of young children

¹⁰ <https://www.mobileCrèches.org/our-story>

2. ECCE as **improving chances for entry and participation in school**
3. ECCE as a **solution to poverty**
4. ECCE as **children's care arrangements for employed mothers**

Objectives of ECCE and children's lives: Some critical issues

Repair and prepare policy

Predominantly, ECCE for well-to-do families is initiated with the rationale of being developmentally appropriate, favourable for peer interactions and preparation for school. For the rest of the world's children, a 'repair and prepare' policy pervades, where ECCE is seen as a potential place where putative deficits of family and/or community can be minimised or removed so that children can have a good start. Although the objectives are likely to be honourable, and carry the best interests of children in mind, several important hurdles to policy, planning and delivery can come up.

Schools and preschools especially in low-income communities, commonly position themselves as institutions that work towards 'repairing' children (rough, unsocialised, unable to sit in one place, unwilling to learn) to transform them and 'prepare' them for school. We have encountered this assumption even among wealthier urban, high fee-paying preschools.

Distance between home and school

Successful schooling must be in partnership with and not antagonistic towards the child's family and culture. Although community participation is an important buzzword in intervention programmes, and educators are trained for keeping in close touch with families, the reality is often very different on the ground. Respect for the teacher and respect for the family are not at odds. We rarely reflect on the fact that such attitudes run the risk of distancing children from the lives of the community, the cultural knowledge, language, livelihood, residence, often leaving them in a nowhere place, not able to return to their cultural background (language, livelihood) and sometimes, tragically, not able to get anywhere with the inadequate schooling experiences that they have had. A large section of the urban educated classes also carry such assumptions and a corresponding contempt for parents and families (Sharma, 2018). School and teachers hold themselves above society. This can be positive outlook

Equity and ECCE

Equity in ECCE means equal access to good quality programmes, in a level playing field (NCTE, 2016). This principle is much easier to imagine than it is to achieve, since the global norms for ECCE which India also endorses, emerge from Western conceptions of children's development, family relations and cultural practices, we need to constantly ensure that children in non-Western contexts are approached from a culturally favourable position, accounting for differences in context. Furthermore, economic differences are not independent of other factors like history, ecology and region, as well as other forms of structural inequality. Equity can only be achieved when local communities are respected and differences are recognized, understood, and when young children are taught to 'notice, name, and interrupt unfair practices around race, ethnicity, language, class, ability, and sexual orientation' such that the discourse about equity becomes heard and practiced. By and large, the tendency remains to keep silent, especially in the classroom.

Evans and Myers in the early 1990s, argued that childrearing practices are embedded in the culture and guide expectations and socialisation of children. These practices that are rooted in cultural beliefs ideas and norm, help parents to make choices and affect the style and quality of caregiving (Evans & Myers, 1994). For instance, carrying a child on one's body has a different effect on the relationship in comparison with placing a child on a stroller. Feeding practices for instance, tend to differ on whether a baby is fed on demand or by a schedule, with manufactured formula or home-made food, or about whether the child is spoken to regularly or not. Beliefs can also change with changes in circumstances. While cultural patterns are shared by members of a community, there are family and individual differences that also need to be accounted for. For intervention programmes among which ECCE services are an important player, the challenge is to work with those aspects that are positively predisposed towards children, and attempt to work against those that are considered unfavourable, although great care needs to be taken in this evaluation because scientific research can often provide contradictory results. Our interventions can also cause unanticipated social changes that can lead to new problems, and we need to fully understand the implications (Kalembe, 1993) and proceed with caution.

Success stories are based on the primary fact that the child is attending a good quality ECCE. Indicators of good quality include infrastructure, material, space availability, teacher characteristics, programme details and materials available to the children. Achieving and maintaining internationally accepted standards for what a good preschool experience should constitute, is a constant challenge. Despite this fact, the reputation of ECCE has rendered questions about cultural and ecological obstacles to

enrolment and attendance of ECCE centres as mute. ECCE has become an essential step in the imagined journey of a child in the modern world. When cultural practices come in the way of enrolment, families are ridiculed and persuaded to alter their lifestyle to bring children into the programme. This claim for a universalized view of childhood objectives becomes problematic for cultures because it tends to undermine local knowledge systems and practices (Moss, 2005): “the meanings people attach to public provisions for children are inextricably linked with social constructions of childhood and our image of the child”. Yet, we have no hesitation in adopting the idea of ECCE from the minority world which houses a fraction of the world’s children. The emancipatory goals of ECCE in technologically advanced societies just does not fit with children growing up in the rest of the world. The rich and complex traditions of the majority world do not feature anywhere in the agenda of ECCE in its present form.

Penn (2002) claims the view of childhood as a global phenomenon, endorsed by organisations like the World Bank, with their neo-liberal economic policies, affect children’s lives adversely since these approaches tend to exacerbate the gap between the rich and poor both between and within nations. The agenda that is legitimized by adopting a position in the best interest of children in fact promotes culture-specific (Anglo-American) notions of family, community and childhood while justifying intervention programmes.

‘Managing diversity’ and ‘handling disadvantage’

Harkness and Super (2006) argue that culture-specific elements correspond to the expression of diverse characteristics in children. Furthermore, human intelligence is designed to be shaped by and adapted to social processes (Thornton (2002). Given this fact of development, how can we justify the antagonism towards the home and family? How then can we possibly justify the agenda of schooling and ECCE as it is visualized in the tradition of “repairing” the child, “alleviating disadvantage” or “enhancing development” unless the family circumstances are considered and respected? Weisner (2016) emphasizes the influence of context of development on developmental pathways of children. He discusses that children cannot simply be seen as existing in “brackets” as they are surrounded by a social world. The social distribution of care of children in societies where multiple care taking is the key construct plays a significant role in children’s development.

Marfo (2015) argues that despite an official end to colonisation decades ago, schooling (in the context of African communities) continues to be “overly preoccupied with abstract, didactic learning and the ostensible preparation of children for future possibilities” (p. 92) in worlds distanced from children’s lives, leading to a serious neglect of local competencies and community interests. In ECCE as in formal schooling,

participatory and collaborative learning is replaced by didactic teaching around unfamiliar phenomena and materials. The continuity between home and school is sacrificed as a consequence and learning at home and on the street is considered inconsequential, even erroneous. Assessment of performance is geared exclusively towards individual performance. There is an urgent need for “contextually compatible models” of care and development (Marfo, 2015, p. 92). These experiments need to be bold in order to push towards social responsibility and community values and away from privileging individual achievement, although there is no reason that these two orientations should be mutually exclusive.

We end this section by concluding that based on scientific evidence and ethical principles, ECCE is obliged to **respect and incorporate the contexts of children’s lives** into the planning, execution and evaluation of school effectiveness. The Right to Education Act ensures these provisions and work has started in full strength. In a recent document released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) covers a detailed set of guidelines under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan¹¹, an integrated scheme of school education for upgrading and enhancing school and preschool services for India’s children that pay attention to cultural, contextual and situational factors. The task now is to find ways of implementing these guidelines.

There is a long way to go. Both scientifically and ethically speaking, children, their families and communities have a right to their culture, and schools at all levels of learning have to accept and work with this principle. Until that happens, the home and school will remain distanced and those children who succeed in school will become distanced from their homes. This is an outcome that we have been responsible for. The loss of language and culture is a profound outcome of existing trends in educational practice. The RTE, apart from making education compulsory, ensures the right to:

“...development of curriculum in consonance with the values enshrined in the Constitution, and which would ensure the all-round development of the child, building on the child’s knowledge, potentiality and talent and making the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety through a system of child friendly and child centred learning.” (MHRD¹², 2009).

India’s diversity necessitates a flexible and contextual approach to ECCE. It also demands sensitivity on the part of the all educators to link ECCE programmes to children’s families and take the existing experiential knowledge of the child as the base for the ECCE programme.

¹¹ http://samaagra.mhrd.gov.in/docs/Framework_IISE%20 F.pdf

¹² <http://mhrd.gov.in/rte>

Family, community and culture: Contexts of early childhood

We have been repeatedly referring to context and culture as being of critical relevance in schooling in general and ECCE in particular. Let us step back and examine what constitutes culture. Culture consists of “historically accumulated knowledge, tools and attitudes that pervade the child’s proximal ecology” (Cole, & Hkkarainen, & Bredikyte, 2010, p. 1). Cultural context is a key feature of human lives and perhaps the most important influence on children’s development, as it determines all of the other factors that will impact the child (Weisner, 2014).

Cultural evidence is also important for distinguishing between chaotic and damaging circumstances, which clearly are harmful to the well-being of children most everywhere, versus cultural practices (such as child tasks and responsibilities; multiple caretaking; training for social intelligence and relational competence; importance of effortful accomplishment and persistence; respect for hierarchy) that may seem deleterious to child well-being by some Western criteria, but which actually promote goals and moral directions for life deemed valuable and can enhance child well-being (Weisner, 2014, p. 87).

Community, culture and pathways

Every cultural community provides pathways of development that consist of everyday routines; these are the cultural activities children engage with and learn from (Keller, 2007). Whether it is taking the cattle to graze, visiting relatives or attending swimming classes, these activities display the priorities of the group into which children are directly and indirectly inducted. Weisner (2002) also argues that these activities are useful units for cultural analysis because they are meaningful engagements for family members that can be used for studying communities, and they are amenable to ethnographic fieldwork, systemic observation, and interviewing, even for setting up ECCE services. Such ordinary activities incorporate beliefs, values and goals, relationships and interpersonal dynamics. These activities provide meaning and relevance to an individual as a member of a particular community at a given place and time. Each cultural setting requires specific skills and adaptations to help a person to live effectively within the specific conditions.

Harkness and Super (2006) argue that the expression of diverse characteristics in children and human intelligence are shaped by and designed to be adapted to social processes (Thornton (2002). Given this fact of development, how can dramatic alterations in community life and learning be justified? Weisner (2016) further emphasizes the influence of context of development on developmental pathways of

children. He discusses that children cannot simply be seen as existing in “brackets” as they are surrounded by a social world. This world, the context of childhood cannot be isolated from learning experiences since the consequences of such a displacement may alienate children from their culture. DeLoche and Gottlieb (2000) add that “Infant care practices vary so much across different societies and historical eras precisely because they are firmly embedded in different physical, economic and cultural frameworks” (p. 5).

Educators can no ignore the compelling evidence of diversity in the care of children. Evidence that clearly demonstrates divergent cultural settings must be incorporated into the policy on education at all levels and we can no longer ignore the significance of cultural diversity. Research from multiple methods (e.g., ethnography, interviews, observations, and assessments) needs to be consolidated as this will enable a more detailed examination of home-school relationships in different settings. Evaluating one culture based on the normative framework of another is not only invalid, it is unethical and has far-reaching consequences.

The Indian family

Despite the fact that it is hard to comprehend and represent the national variations in family structure, function and ideology, there are some features of family life that transcend Indian communities and may even be shared with other Asian communities. In an annotated bibliography of research on the family in India, Sriram and Bharat (2003) identify features that characterise families in India including patriarchy, close relationships, role expectations guided by age and sex (Khalakdina, 2008). Traditionally among Hindus, the family was believed to be more as a phase of life, an activity rather than an entity (Chaudhary, 2017a) that fulfils a person's duty to society (Saraswathi, 1999).

Among current concerns of family life, Sriram and Bharat (2003) argue that globalisation and market forces have become critical factors in altered family functioning even if organisation may remain unchanged. These altered dynamics have presumably destabilised some traditional boundaries within and outside the family network. Consequences of these transformations place stress on relationships between sexes (Trawick, 2003) and care of the elderly (Sriram & Bharat, 2003) and therefore on family life.

The family in India can be labelled as 'traditional', given the widespread specificity of gender and age related roles within the family. The concept of the erstwhile large family sustains among members even when joint families split up. People tend to include others within their network referring to them as cousins, aunts and uncles even

when they are not related. This illustrates the importance of the family as well as the larger social community. In a study on preferences for family structure in a particular village over a period of 60 years has shown an actual decline in the popularity of a separate nuclear unit, favouring the large joint family (Wadley & Derr, 1988).

Uberoi (1993) wrote that conjugality is the key relationship in Western families, whereas for Indians, the central relationship is the one between a mother and her child. The main task a 'couple' faces in Western society is to reconcile marital and parental roles, whereas an Indian couple faces multiple tasks. The parental role is simply one additional responsibility in the long list of negotiations in a complex social unit (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2018). Characteristically, relationships between the child and parent have been found to be intense, characterised by life-long closeness, especially with the mother (Seymour, 2010). Like Caste, the family system has been noted to be resilient, showing adaptability to social and economic forces. Those families that live as nuclear units in urban areas, were like "satellites" of a kin living in a village or town (Srinivas, 1972/1995, p. 144). It is actually flexibility rather than rigidity that characterises Indian community life (Srinivas 1972/1995).

In the task of child rearing, relationships are characterised by reciprocal expectations and interdependence rather than autonomy (Dalal & Misra, 2002). A child is considered to be an extension of the parents. It is complementarity and not equality are the principles of which relationships are transacted within the family (Dalal & Misra, 2002). The family is seen as the primary site for socialisation for patriarchy, actively reinforcing fundamental patterns (Derne, 1998; Ganesh, 1999), and both the Indian psyche and family structure are reinforced by central cultural ideas (Kakar & Kakar, 2007).

The traditional joint family constitutes several smaller families (of brothers, and single or widowed sisters) living with their parents where resources are pooled and activities are shared. We need to search beyond the debate of the nuclear versus joint family (Uberoi, 2003) because even when nuclear units live separately, social engagements continue unless there are conflicts. In a recent newspaper article covering the recently completed census of 2011, Singh (2012) reports precisely this; that as India becomes more urbanised, one would expect the family to be smaller on an average. However, many factors, ranging from economic to emotional, indicate that in fact, there is actually an increase in the statistical average of family size. Despite its common appeal, the 'joint family' does not have universal acceptance among Indians. Instead, there is a wide variety of structures bound together by the notion of the joint family, even in villages. Kakar and Kakar (2007) propose that joint living is founded on the economy of larger numbers. Regarding the presumed breakdown of larger families on account of the forces of modernisation, there is in fact evidence to suggest the exact opposite; the prevalence of larger families may actually be on the rise on account of several reasons, (Uberoi, 2003). For the care of children, often it is not fraternal closeness

but the availability of several temporary and permanent 'others' like aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins or household helpers, who may or may not share a common kitchen with the primary family.

We argue that these features of Indian families are in fact at odds with the objectives and activity of schooling at an early age. From family closeness to multiple caregiving, children are raised in the company of other children, even cared for by other children, siblings or cousins (Suneja, 2018).

Diversity in India

With the size and varying in its population, planning for any kind of service, especially related to families and young children is faced with several important challenges. In order to place the issue in perspective, let us just revisit some of the points of diversity that would impact the planning of any ECCE service.

Ecological variation

The Indian subcontinent is large and varied, and the geographical diversity is daunting. From the slopes of the Himalayas to the shores of Kerala, children live under vastly different conditions. Each ecological setting has its own challenges, what will become problematic for a forest dweller is not likely to be a challenge for a child living in a city. For implementation and delivery of services, regional, seasonal and geographic features need to be studied. Regarding ECCE services, bringing centres to the community dwelling is key to their enrolment and participation.

Ethnic, social and religious diversity

As a country where people's religious and ethnic identity is protected as a fundamental right, educational and other services are required to respect and protect these rights of families and children. There are many ways in which the equitable participation of children can be impacted. Religious and ethnic differences can become reasons for separating children even before they enter school. The ethnic membership of a teacher, economic status, and place of residence can all become contentious issues in her participation in the programme and acceptance by the community. Similarly, these factors can also influence her engagement with children, favourable or adversely. Such factors can be easily overcome with appropriate orientation and training for commitment. In the instance of specific children and families, their membership can impact their entry and participation. Under conditions of diversity, minority status and social hierarchy need to be kept outside of the centre in order to fulfil the ethical objectives of any service, yet to proceed as if these do not influence services would be

an act of ignorance. Language is a carrier of identity and culture and linguistic diversity has played a key role in India's history. For instance, the different States and Union Territories were, at the time of independence, drawn along linguistic boundaries, taking dominant language as the criteria for marking State borders. We will now look more deeply at the case of language since this is also a critical component in the curriculum, implementation and community interactions.

Language in the preschool

Learning and development in children is guided actively through language use. Often the distance between the languages of the home, the community and the school can exacerbate the distance children experience if they belong to an ethnic minority. During preschool years, the importance of mother tongue conversations is even more critical, both for the comprehension as well as the comfort of young children. How does one deal with this monumentally difficult issue of language (and cultural) diversity?

Let us examine the context. India's children speak one of the 780 odd languages Devy identified through the People's Linguistic Survey of India, with the possibility of at least another 100 that they had been unable to reach. This was at least 500 odd languages more than what the languages survey during the 2011 Census had counted. This uncovers the extensively multilingual nature of country, a problem that has proved to be problematic in the planning for school languages. For Devy, the survey and its findings relates not only to the preservation of languages, but also the particular past that is contained in them (Devy, 2014). Mohanty argues that for a child to have a firm foothold in school, the foundation must be built through the mother tongue(s), with a phased introduction of other languages. In an attempt to resolve the tension between language of knowledge and home language that continues to haunt the country, Devy (2018) extends a proposal wherein the two (or more) need not be separated through the establishment of regional Special Language Resource Centres (SLRCs) that provide support to school going students and others to support the construction of bridges between the several languages in India. This also needs the support and action of citizens themselves, which is now clearly directed towards the ambition to study the English language that is seen as a path to success. The participation of NGOs, Government Organisations and schools is essential for the success of such an experiment, in fact everyone has to work concertedly towards ensuring that children's home languages are preserved and respected.

One in every six of school-going children in the world is waiting for the bridge between the word "future" in her home language and the same word in the language of "power" and "knowledge". This done, the "logocide" let loose upon young minds can be arrested at least partially. India can find its honourable place in the world's knowledge

community not by becoming monolingual and culturally uprooted but by remaining multilingual and culturally productive. (Emphasis original, Devy, 2018, p. 14)

Individual differences, ability and disability

For any programme with a group of children, individual differences are a fundamental reality. Apart from demographic factors and other social characteristics, children also differ from each other in ability. This range also covers children with disability. All children have a right to equal opportunity and recognition of the needs of children with disability is even more crucial as family members may need support in their care and development. ECCE centres must be the source of that support on account of their presence, activity and objectives to fulfil the rights of children and supplement families in need.

The Indian family and ECCE: Summing up

With this cultural background, there are several important points of agreement and disagreement between family ideology and ECCE. The reason why we bring it up is not to argue for the inappropriateness of ECCE, but to assert that specific features of family life in India need attention and acceptance, even adaptation when services for children and families are considered separating the child early from a familiar social unit is not often acceptable to families. Rather than seeing this as a traditional practice that interferes with participation in schooling, for instance, keeping the older child home and out of school to care for a younger one), it is possible to plan services that in fact complement rather than conflict with local beliefs and practices. The child's separation from a familiar group at the preschool age is not necessary, although it is an expectation of most centres for young children. However, as and when there is a need, such support must be available to the family, as should be their inclusion.

Ecological validity and ethics of ECCE with reference to Indian childhood is an important concern. From the above descriptions about the culture of Indian families, it is possible to argue that there are some patterns of family life that stand at odds with the objectives of ECCE as it is currently visualized in the global scenario. The notion of ecological validity derives from the writing of Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggesting that every setting allows participating individuals to learn and practice social behaviours in tandem with other individuals, and the beliefs and practices of their own communities. The arrangement of the learning environment by the socializing agents gives sanction to children's participation by permitting some and forbidding some of the behaviours (Whiting & Edwards, 1992). There are several controlling factors that guide the

socialization of children for specific behaviours. For instance, the network of relationships, occupation of the family, community services and social structures and cultural traditions, rules and regulations, the division of labour, are some of the determinants that constitute a setting, the context of childhood. These factors are so deep-rooted in the ecological contexts and young children can be seen practicing, responding and eliciting behaviours in ordinary interactions with their social partners. Likewise, the caregiver also abides by the socialization practices by making necessary adjustments within the cultural agenda. Interventions in family life and children's care by agencies outside the family and community have potential impact on this delicate balance of the child in culture. Let us examine which of the factors would emerge as problematic for Indian families:

Participation in household work:

Indian children are expected to participate in household chores like subsidiary tasks in traditional occupations as well as the care of younger children. School participation works against this principle since the child is expected to adapt to the rhythms of school life.

Interdependence and collaboration:

Children grow up in close interaction and interdependence with other children and a large network of familiar adults which is the scenario for profound cultural learning and socialisation. From ECCE onwards, this responsibility is expected to shift to the teacher, and often works in opposition with these relationships. This expectation is even more exaggerated for the "disadvantaged child, since the school (ECCE included) is imagined as a place where the child will improve, change and progress to a better way of living and earning. This antagonism is so prevalent that it is taken for granted by most educators, even among middle and upper classes. The home and family is often constructed as a place where things are done wrongly which children have to unlearn before being "taught".

Distributed intelligence and learning with others:

Learning among communities, especially those in rural and tribal areas is co-operative and collaborative. One can use the expression "distributed intelligence" to describe the knowledge that children have. Information is not expected to reside inside people, but among them. Siblings, neighbours and cousins teach each other and care for each other. School expects children to be on their own and learn on their own. Dependence on others is seen as a problem that children have to overcome. Children are supposed to learn for their own progress and not for the benefit of others. This ideology is

completely in opposition to community practice. Schools promote independence and autonomy in learning and development.

Language and learning:

Predominantly, the language/s of the home are treated as informal and crude and the child is expected to abandon familiar tongues and adopt new ones. This has resulted in a widespread loss of language and difficulty in schooling. Fortunately a whole range of work is ongoing in this field in different States in India.

Participation in functions and festivals:

Communities value participation in social functions, festivals and family events and visits to other places. Schools expect that children first priority should be the school calendar and time-table. This tends to create tensions between the family and school.

Family occupations, seasonal migration and village visits:

Family occupations often require adults or entire families to migrate seasonally or periodically, either for work or for family visits. Schools attendance is compromised, but these visits are often urgent and can be a great source of joy and significance for the growing child, especially visits to extended family. Children often lose place in schools during such visits.

Sibling care:

Schools and preschools are usually not nearby. This prevents sibling care that is a very important part of children's socialisation.

Household structures and the care of books:

Children are expected to care for bags, books and stationery, often in large households, this can be quite a challenge. Children face a lot of negativity from schools for not being able to "take care" of their materials. Most often, this is not the children's fault, but a consequence of a very different way of living.

Prosocial development, helping and cooperation:

Prosociality has been found to be related to cultural practices and children growing up in multiple care settings in close collaboration with others can be predicted to better prepared for helping, cooperation and collaboration. In fact, these are abilities that are

not necessarily recognised by schools that work towards autonomy and competitiveness. This often creates conflicts in children.

Homework problems for first generation learners:

It is a well-known fact that children of parents who have been to school are best adapted to schools. So, in fact, the ones who need it most are most out-of-place in schools on account of the fact that 'preparation for schooling' is something that is expected from the family and when it is not available, teachers and school administrators can become antagonistic towards children. The demand for homework and the participation of parents in children's learning is an unreasonable expectation, especially for first generation learners. Despite knowing this, teachers often treat first generation learners with contempt.

Home school differences

Wide cultural differences among children and their families can become a stumbling block. Teachers' attitudes towards children is guided by social status and economic progress, and not towards equality as is the objective of schooling.

Play in informal settings:

Play is assumed to be something that happens under supervision and with specific materials. What children do in the street and playground is not considered play and is not placed as a value by schools. Children are expected to learn within specific informal settings in order for it to be valuable for learning and development. Furthermore, play and work (e.g. Household work like care of siblings, cattle-care and other manageable household chores) is a clear expectation in many Indian homes. These responsibilities are in opposition of the principle that children should be exempt from work and 'free' for school. Such expectations create antagonism between home and school and need to be reconsidered to find a way of working with such beliefs rather than against them in order to ensure that children stay in school.

Play and early stimulation

Sutton-Smith (1997) has argued that play is hard to define on account of the fact that views about play have been shrouded in rhetoric. Yet we all know what it is like to play. Burke (1966, p. 423) proposed that play is a "dramatistic negative", used when something is refuted, before words emerge, this behaviour is clearly not what it represents since they do not have a way of saying 'no', for instance, playfully biting is

not the same as seriously biting or shaping dough out of clay is not really the same thing as making it! Play has a paradoxical nature. It both is and is not what it appears to be (Bateson, 1955). There is a diverse range of activities that can potentially be labelled as play including fantasy, mind games, solitary play, fun activities, playful behaviours like tricks, subjective play and informal play, the functions of which are to “reinforce an organism's variability in the face of rigidifications of successful adaptation” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 231). Theories in child development promote the idea that play is children's work and that particularly in the early years, children learn through playful encounters with their environment. Developmentally, the significance of play is the practice with symbolic action, learning to represent objects in the world around them with symbols. This comes most naturally to children and other than an area of exploration and some materials, this playful engagement with the environment does not require intervention from adults. Some theories promote specific strategies and materials for play whereas others support a more natural engagement and unstructured play. Undeniably, these experiences hold a great significance for children.

The common understanding of play as a structured activity under specially created circumstances and specific materials is a recent development in the history of society.

Cultural variation in understanding play

Although play is universal, people's understanding of play for children is varied. Roopnarine (2014) calls for a “scientific integration” of perspectives on play in order to go beyond narrow notions of playfulness and play activities and rhetoric about play (p. 3). The nature and quality of play among children from different parts of the world is different depending upon the materials and space available as well as beliefs about play. People's perspectives on play have been known to change under the influence of modernisation (Roopnarine, 2014). Cultural diversity in play activities demonstrates that work and play need not be mutually exclusive, and in some cultures, the boundaries between these two kinds of activities do not exist and children participate in work around the household and play from a young age. A young child in a rural Indian household would be expected to care for a younger sibling along with and as long as he fulfils the responsibilities assigned, he would be free to play around (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2018). Thus with a large repertoire of traditional games and activities, children in India, especially in rural and tribal communities, do not perceive play and work separately. Furthermore, childhood and adulthood are conceived in continuity and most spaces are open to children and adults (Menon & Saraswathi, 2017). This inclusive continuity in community living has an important impact on the way children play and what and who they play with.

By and large adults perceive play as children's engagement and do not feel the need to actively interact with children while they are playing (Chaudhary, 2014), although this would be different for urban, educated, middle and upper class parents. In a research study with rural families in Gujarat in the early 2000s, during her fieldwork, Abels instructed mothers to 'play as they usually do' with their children, a common instruction among Western research studies with young children. To her surprise, this instruction received much laughter as the women declared the play is something children do, and not something that adults do with children (Abels, 2008). This highlights the fact that play is construed differently by different communities. The free and informal engagements of children on the street and in the fields is, unfortunately, not often seen as play during which time they can also learn in the contemporary understanding of 'play' in the modern world. In current educated understanding, such engagements are a 'waste of valuable time' which would be better spent 'stimulating' a child or participating in some constructive learning, working towards attaining the child's full potential. This argument has recently come under severe criticism as the pressure of formal systems of learning become too much for children and families and experts now urge parents to return children to more 'natural' and accidental experiences and fewer supervised and planned activities, so many of which can prevent certain capabilities from developing, recent research informs us (The Hindu, 2018).

The pendulum swings on, and we are now flooded with advice on how to bring up children from which parents have to make choices. For those of us who have access to information on the possibilities for care and education, and have access to debates about schooling, there is still a fear of missing out. For those who do not have this access, prevailing public opinion guides what they believe, and by and large, communities do have faith in schools and believe that their children will become "*bada aadmi*" and will not have to live and work like them. Young children are sent to available teaching shops with the objective of making them learn how to "sit and stand" [*utthna, baithna seekhenge*] in the absence of which children will grow wild. This is the ideological landscape on which schooling is founded. Unfortunately, what children have to go through, more often than not, fails to meet either the expectation of the home, or of the school. Children leave their home, so to speak, but they are not able to get into or stay in school. Yet, learning experiences are crucial for children, and under difficult and unsafe conditions, children need opportunities.

A good start

The importance of a good start in life including nutrition, stimulation, physical care and play, cannot be underestimated. The availability of opportunities with consistent upkeep and enrichment of the child's world with age-relevant and context-specific play and learning activities, in tune with cultural context, contemporary times and technological advancements, even in the most remote or economically backward

setting, can go a long way in promoting overall development. But this assumption must not underestimate the significance of folk interpretations of play and traditional games. Children's motivation to learn is universal, and may become compromised only under severe conditions like man-made and natural disasters. Motivation to play can also be dampened under negative attitudes towards play.

All children are interested in exploration. The 'Hole-in-the-wall' project initiated by Sugata Mitra provides ample evidence of children's natural attraction to information and their curiosity to learn, even for those who are out of school, promoting what they label as the "Minimally Invasive Education" experiment¹³. He initiated a service where technology (computers) were made available to children, after which they were left alone to 'play' with it. Children were found to be quick on the uptake even beyond what experts on curriculum would have designed or imagined, participating in collaborative problem-solving and innovation. Play is autonomy-invoking, and guided self-learning through play needs to be sustained not only at the early childhood stage but also at later stages of a child's development. However, this does not need to happen at the expense of collaborative learning. These different sorts of play (solitary and cooperative) are different manifestations of children's engagement with the world, and a well-rounded experiences incorporates these different dimensions quite naturally.

Play interventions in different contexts: How robust is the evidence?

Despite the fact that intervention under conditions of war, destitution and disability find significant benefits of early intervention (Kulkarni, George & Bhaskaran, 2017), there is insufficient evidence about whether early stimulation can benefit children's schooling trajectories or child health directly (Baker-Henningham & Bo, 2010). Research findings are not as clear as they are claimed to be precisely because of the scientific and ethical limitations to research with human subjects.

Research indicates that the most vulnerable children are significantly benefited by ECCE, but the same cannot be said about the general population (Nores & Barnett, 2010), particularly for schooling and nutritional outcomes. Studies report some benefits to maternal health and practices, but these are not dramatic. Few studies report sustained improvement in cognitive scores, and then one has to go deeper into the tools and techniques used to reach the conclusion. Although some short-term improvements are seen, there is no evidence on the effect of these interventions on child behaviour, schooling or health or on maternal outcomes (Baker-Henningham & Bo, 2010). What does this absence of strong evidence suggest to us for the value of ECCE? Does it still justify the expenses world-wide? We believe that it is not essential for us to find strong evidence in order to support ECCE (precisely because of problems with

¹³ <http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/index.html>

experimentation on children). ECCE as a valued activity is here to stay and it is important to make the best of the trend for sending young children to preschool centres, not only because women work outside the home or children need spaces to play, or for future outcomes, but for children's present engagements. Yet this needs to be done in a manner that is developmentally and culturally appropriate, because otherwise, there is a risk of unfavourable consequences for children and communities.

Social spaces for the child: Visibility, equity and ECCE

We have provided ample support to argue that the best place for a young child to grow up in is the family, and a child's home is ideally a haven for its care and development. Yet, we need to acknowledge that not all families are able to provide optimally for all a child's needs. It is a matter of debate how much and what circumstances lead to a family being categorized as inadequate or incapable of raising a child and prevailing economic conditions would provide us with a measureable standard within culture. Norms and conditions in other countries cannot be used to measure families everywhere. Making sweeping conclusions about children living in different countries, regions, cultures or communities is unreasonable, unscientific and unethical. Criteria for unsuitability of parents are clearly drawn among wealthier nations, where parents stand the risk of losing their children to institutional or foster care in case of assumed inabilities as parents and Child Protection Services are vigilant and active. Despite having honourable objectives, the outcomes of such vigilance is not always positive for children as has been seen in the case of children of immigrant families and relatively poorer homes. Child protection by the State is not without problems as different standards of communities (as in the case of recent migrants) can become contentious issues between parents and the Child Protection Services¹⁴ (See Chaudhary, 2017b for more detail).

Policy in India is far more favourable to assuming the fundamental goodness of parents' intentions, although they may not always be able to fulfill children's needs. This makes the availability of ECCE services critical as a support system to provide services for young children. This service (of supporting families in need) is a special case for poorer nations and needs to be discussed as a specific issue above and beyond the agenda of ECCE as a programme for children alone. Here, ECCE centres potentially contribute to family welfare, especially for women. Let us examine the situation. According to one estimate,

“.....over 200 million children under 5 are not reaching their developmental potential based on indicators of poverty and early childhood stunting Growing up in poverty, in poor health, being

¹⁴ Also see http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the-dystopia-of-the-child-protection-industry/21673#.W3U_ZeqzblW

exposed to family and environmental stress, exposure to violence and lack of early learning experiences, and other risk factors lead to social and economic consequences that stand in the way of achieving prosperity and economic development (Lombardi, 2015, p. 5)"

The point that several children and families need support is undeniable and the argument is not about whether they need special services to support early development, our concern is how this care and education is presented, by whom and for what purpose. In the delivery, how the beneficiaries are approached and what the interface between people is like, is key to the successful delivery of services. Although problems exist, it has to be understood that the dynamics of the problems and workable solutions are context-bound.

Any expenditure by Governments that are already under financial constraints can only be justified if the local populations benefit from the interventions. A serious audit of welfare programmes across the developing world is an urgent need (Burman, 1996). Presently, welfare does not seem to have had the sort of world-wide impact that was predicted and aid agencies have clearly exaggerated success stories (Rajan & Subramanian, 2007; Serpell & Nsamenang, 2014), but that does not mean that welfare services are not needed, a renewal in policy, planning an delivery is an urgent need if the continued expenditure and the presence of international and national aid agencies is to be justified.

Child outside the home environment

The need for good quality ECCE services is intensified under difficult circumstances, societal, regional or familial, and these relate to young children who, for some reason or other, have to live away from their family home, when adults in the family have to be away for long hours in a day, or where acute conditions prevent the adequate care and nourishment of children. Furthermore, children with disability need special attention on account of their physiological condition that may prove to be a limiting factor. Under such circumstances, provisions for care and opportunities are urgently required for the child's well-being.

Where were young children in the past? The answer would definitely be in the folds of a family or community. In times of disaster and destitution, children were placed under institutional or foster care. The primary requirement is that young children need protection, care, nourishment, safety and opportunities for exploring the environment. Another important reason for requiring institutions for ECCE is the shrinking of safe and secure public spaces for children to explore. Yet, as Pinker argues, this is also the most favourable time in the history of mankind in terms of conflict and violence (Pinker, 2011).

From this, let us proceed to search where the children in Indian communities are commonly placed. Are they safe, healthy, nourished? Do they learn things from each other? Gradually, a child's world expands to the larger community and engagement with other children and adults outside the immediate family becomes a way of life. This expansion is both natural and recommended. Spending the early years in the safe confines of the family has worked for millennia. So now, when we favour children to be separated for short durations each day, for the purpose of enhancing learning and development, there are a significant number of precautions that need to be taken before that can happen. For families with sufficient resources, the movement outside home are available, but for large numbers, particularly the urban poor, these conditions are not fulfilled and the requirement of spaces to play and interact with others are unavailable. Also when mothers, who are usually primary caregivers are working outside home then in some cases child will be outside home for childcare in mother's absence. Safety, nutrition, health care and opportunities for exploration are urgently required for large numbers of children if we are to fulfil our responsibilities towards children and society.

When children attend a program outside the home, there is a corresponding increase in risk as well. The risk of abuse and neglect. Any establishment of institutions for the care of children, at any age, needs to ensure high standards of safety of children's physical, emotional and psychological well-being. The programmes are also important spaces where the family can be accessed for other services or surveys through the presence of the child. Potentially, the ECCE centre can be a hub of interface between families, service providers and the State, if adequately managed.

Quality childcare: Dimensions

There are many dimensions of quality in ECCE services: personnel, space, materials, curriculum, services and funding. In order for maintaining quality, each one of these dimensions needs adequate attention.

Personnel

Let us first consider the personnel. Educators, teachers and care workers are responsible for the maintenance of equity and social justice for all sorts of diversity as well as maintain a good programme. Furthermore, children come to the preschool with existing knowledge and skills. It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to conduct inclusive practices in which collaborative learning is fostered and to provide opportunities for children and families to participate in decisions that affect them. As far

as delivery of the curriculum is concerned, as Dr. Anandalakshmy recently mentioned “the fundamental principles of a classroom are not really different for different ages, whether it is the preschool class or a post-graduate one” (personal communication, Tuesday August 14, 2018). A teacher needs to be committed, considerate, focussed, knowledgeable (about the subject as well as the student) and fair. For young children, the approach may be slightly different, but the principles remain largely the same.

There is a critical need to assess diversity-related issues of children and families in ECCE settings in India. While policy documents and curricular frameworks provide structure to ECCE settings, much lies in the hands of the field-level practitioners of ECCE services. The pivotal roles and relationships in the community and ECCE settings will influence the quality of transactions, as well as the child’s learning and adaptability to vital aspects of the curriculum, thereby affecting the success of the program and ensuring regular audits of relevance and reliability. The teacher is looked upon as a key figure, more so in poverty settings, and parents look up to her in the quest for a bright future for their child. If the teacher is an incompetent figure, their faith in the relevance of the ECCE program will fade.

Training

Training should be focused on confidence-building, knowledge and skills for effectively managing diversity as well as the capability to make learning relevant to the community. Educators need to dialogue with families on a regular basis to maintain mutual respect and open communication for all children. Furthermore, educators have the potential of having access to intimate glimpses into the lives of children, which can make an important contribution to policy and implementation. A teacher who is respected for her role and position by the system is also likely to transfer that respect to her participants.

ECCE programmes should promote healthy relationships between teachers and the community to foster community identities and promote a sense of belonging. It is not just important to acknowledge and accept cultural difference, to work towards removing discrimination and bias, social, ethnic and individual; it is also important to go further to implement knowledge, skills and products of the local culture to facilitate regard for the community, neither overly celebratory, or with contempt. It is essential to maintain balance and ECCE curriculum transaction should avoid the ‘tourist approach’ to discussing cultural diversity (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Community involvement

We have read in an earlier section that the main criterion for sending children to ECCE centres is that it tends to result in more effective entry into retention in school in later years. Another important reason for the establishment of ECCE centres in India has been the argument for women's participation in work. Both aspects are important to discuss with the community. On account of the fact that positive outcomes are found only when ECCE centres are of good quality, the community has to be encouraged to participate and contribute to the services by pooling resources and taking ownership, and the teacher is a key figure in this relationship. In this manner, the services are much more likely to be connected to the local culture. This is likely to result in higher teacher motivation as well. ECCE programs are multi-sectoral in essence and political and administrative support feeding into global frameworks such as those provided by the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) will go a long way in ensuring quality learning for young children.

Curriculum, safe and adequate space for children, materials and adequate funding are other important aspects to be kept in mind in determining quality.

ECCE models

India has a wide range of models in the field of ECCE including Anganwadis, Private preschools, Government/private schools having a preschool section and Anganwadis located in Government primary schools. Some of these models are nation-wide whereas others are single centres or clusters of centres providing for local communities. It is now accepted that more than child readiness, the readiness of the school or program is important. ECCE can be a key strategy for creating equity. Talking of equity, early childhood programs should involve fathers on an equal footing with mothers to create balanced equations within the classroom, family and community.

Of late, there has been a focus-shift for making ICDS and other successful early childhood programs feeding centres to local programs with strong early education components. ECCE programs must aim to become models of holistic intervention. Low school readiness levels show that ECCE programmes have long way to go in delivering the results. Education policy must draw as much from successful components of existing models of excellence in ECCE, as from the failures of national and local programs. Scaling up of feasible, successful models poses a big question on the ECCE scene. Incorporating learning from multiple in-country models, as well as lessons from ECCE programs in other countries should be the working norm as far as the on-ground program and on-paper policies go. ECCE programs must be such that the stakeholders - parents, teachers and the children - feel completely part of the early education

dialogue. The sense of ownership must be cultivated. **Uniformity is not a value, relevance is;** this is how we can dialogue quality with community resources (Personal communication, Anandalakshmy, 31st August, 2018).

Policy and practices related to ECCE in India

Making a firm commitment to the right of children to education, care, nourishment and health, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) introduced National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy in the year 2013 highlighting children's needs. ECCE services are delivered through Government, Private and Non-governmental agencies. Under the outreach of the ICDS programme (Integrated Child Development Services) millions of children in 3-6 years of age are covered through government run Anganwadis and the National Scheme for Working Women. Through the 86th Constitutional Amendment, the critical role of quality pre-school education was recognised in Article 45: "The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years". ECCE is now an officially recognised activity for the children of India. As a consequence, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 advised that:

"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 shall make necessary arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children" (GOI, 2009) Presently, this provision is being implemented by MWCD ensuring the right of children to pre-school education. Also, the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) include pre-school education under 4th goal to "ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning" with a target of universal coverage by the year 2030 (NCPCR, n.d.).

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Section 11, clearly recognizes the importance of ECCE in later school participation. Further, the MHRD, responding to demands from States, has established a sub-committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education to inspect the feasibility of reducing the age covered by the RTE Act to below the age of 6. This would mandate the coverage of ECCE under the Act. Furthermore, under the 12th Five Year Plan for Elementary Education, at least a year of good quality pre-school education in primary schools is advised for all children, especially those living in backward areas.

Under the National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework (MWCD, 2014), clear guidelines are provided for ECCE (NCERT, 2018) including keeping a vision of a holistic, integrated and continuous nature of development and learning. Also, there is a need to separate children between 0-3 and 3-6 years of age under ECCE on account of their specific developmental needs. In the first three years, the focus should remain on a nurturing, stimulating and protective environment a focus on primary care, strengthening resilience and protection and developing language. Above three years of age, an added dimension of play opportunities needs to be added, the guidelines explain. The need to make the programmes relevant to both for the individual as well as society is recognised. Regarding the National ECCE Policy, the following list has been circulated to all States and Union Territories regarding curriculum, quality assessment and record keeping. The Government of India has made a strong commitment in terms of policy and efforts like the National Education Policy (1986) and National ECCE Policy (2013) articulate this commitment to the provision and improvement of ECCE for providing health and care facilities, infrastructure, curriculum, teacher training; and enhancing the teaching-learning process. According to the recent surveys, the accessibility to the provisions for 3 to 8 years old children i.e. preschool and early primary education have risen significantly (NCERT, 2018).

More recently, the launch of the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan¹⁵ by the MHRD demonstrates the deepening commitment of the Central Government towards enhancing the quality of school education in Government schools and programmes. A more detailed analysis of this document will be covered in a later section.

ECCE Centres and Schools: A possibility

There has been some debate about the common territory for schools and preschools on account of the concern over formalising ECCE and losing the intimate nature of a small centre, and also a fear the Care and Education will become truncated into formal education for young children. Yet, there are many advantages of this scheme as it provides the benefit of sibling care and supervision of young children by older ones. In one initiative, the Law Commission Report on Early Childhood Development and Legal Entitlements (GOI, 2015) recommends that the government provide free pre-school education for all children aged 3-6 years, to be established within existing school premises in a phased manner. Another significant support for adding on ECCE to existing institutions comes from the 22nd Joint Review Mission (JRM) of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in December 2015 where 4-6 year old children are advised to be enrolled in ECCE sections in all primary schools. In the recent Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (MHRD, 2018) document, there is a clear guideline for merging school and preschool programmes wherever possible. Concrete guidelines have been articulated for the

¹⁵ http://samagra.mhrd.gov.in/docs/Framework_IISE%20F.pdf

movement of preschool centres with adequate provision for age-appropriate facilities. Wherever this is not possible, other solutions are suggested. This indicates a clear commitment by the Government towards consolidating preschool services and school programmes. Apart from Government schools, there is another large section of privately run schools in the country, these are multiplying in numbers by leaps and bounds.

Private play schools

It is now widely recognized that there is a significant number of private players in the field of preschool education, largely also English medium schools, and it is unwise to ignore this massive uprising of small and large players in the game. Research has identified that private schools are only a downward extension of primary school curriculums (Young Lives, 2017).

Low-fee paying private schools have become an important phenomenon in the field of ECCE (Sood, 2014; Singh 2014) and it is no longer possible to ignore their popularity. In a report on ECCE by NCERT (2015) it was discovered that children's performance is somewhat better when they emerge from private preschools as assessed through their performance on selected standardized tests despite the scepticism related to the downward extension of primary school activities. The authors report that the validity of these findings needs to be taken with due attention to the design and testing limitations. Another study found significantly better performance by children attending private preschools (Gupta, 2016). Furthermore, parents are better satisfied with the performance and activities of private schools (Kaul, Bhattacharjea, Chaudhary, Ramanujan, Banerji & Nanda, 2017).

It is therefore significant that there are recent changes in policy wherein the presence of these institutions is recognized by the government. This section deals with the policy changes that have taken place recently regarding the recognition of these institutions. The first in a series of activities was initiated by the Union Territory of Chandigarh providing a format for schools to apply for State recognition under the guidelines of the NCPCR (National Commission for the Protection of Children's Rights). These guidelines aim towards:

- bringing inclusiveness and uniformity in all preschools
- to prevent violation of child rights and any kind of abuse against children in the age 3-6 years by regulating such educational institutions providing pre-school education.
- to achieve national as well as international commitment of pre-school education for children in the age 3-6 years and preparing them for primary education.

- to remove ambiguity in the early childhood education (ECCE) system in India by regulating all preschools (NCPCR, n.d.)

Detail has been provided for standards which preschools have to follow in order to ensure quality by providing ideal figures for number of adults, curriculum, building, classrooms, toilets, outdoor play area, running water and toilets, pest control, fire safety, programme requirements, teaching aids and learning materials, library, provisions for health and record-keeping. The list is long, but it is obvious that when Government services themselves are unable to provide these standards, expectations from private schools can be ineffective.

A mention must also be made of the scheme for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in high fee-paying schools. Under this scheme, private, fee-paying schools are required to admit children from poorer homes with the purpose of social justice and integration. Official evaluations of the EWS scheme are not easily available, but word of mouth assessments indicate several problems in the system that either fail to have the desired impact or exaggerate social distance between the children. A more systematic analysis of the scheme needs to be conducted in order to better understand the dynamics of this service, even in pre-primary sections (Sreekanth, 2013).

Budget allocations

If the campaign for ECCE is to work, there is an urgent need for the separate fund for ECCE. Remarking on the reduction in budget allocations, this report (Singh, 2018) argues for crating specific sources for funding children's welfare and protecting them from abuse! Let us examine some of the figures related to this issue in recent times. The allocations for children's education has gone down from 3.28 percent in 2014-15 to 2.48 percent in 2017-18, children's health and nutrition from 1.26 percent in 2014-15 to 1.15 percent in 2017-18, and child protection from 0.04 percent in 2014-15 and was 0.06 percent in 2017-18 (Union Budget, 2018).

Election campaigns declare promises to raise employment and economic growth along with some assurances for the survival of the poorest. The performance of a Government is largely based on economic progress, but there is also a commitment to human development and investments in human capital. In reality, however, the focus remains significantly on infrastructural growth for economic progress. Investing in human capital, particularly children yields long-term results and that too only if the expenditures are on good quality, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant services. Governments are usually short-sighted in their planning to demonstrate quick results. It is possible that this reason determines the low priority given to services for children and families. A shift in the implementation of education programmes under the Delhi Government has shown dramatic results (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2018) and that is

the sort of commitment that we need to make to children's welfare since high quality interventions can also show quick results.

Again, in the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, we read commitments towards all aspects of schooling and preschools including teacher salaries, infrastructure, materials, training and supervision. Elaborate financial calculations for the same are also provided.

State level patterns in ECCE

Nationwide, the Ministry of Women and Child Development is working with UNICEF to develop resource material prototypes as per the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy. The State of Maharashtra has harnessed the support of UNICEF to pilot and implement a community-based model of care to retain children in schools who come from families who migrate seasonally for work. The objective is also to enhance the involvement of parents and communities by building capacities of frontline workers on parenting. In Madhya Pradesh, the Government partnered with UNICEF and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to improve children's access to services and protection by strengthening the local governance¹⁶. Likewise there are many more initiatives across India to strengthen the ECCE services.

There has been an increase in budgets for Anganwadis. For instance, with evidence, support and push from several organizations such as UNICEF, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS), Child Rights Trust (CRT) and Karnataka Child Rights Observatory (KCRO) and other CSOs, the Government of Karnataka has demonstrated its commitment towards young children by increasing the expenditures on nutrition for children attending Anganwadis, construction of new AW centres (with assistance from NABARD and MGNREGA) and increase of honoraria of the AWWs.¹⁷ The Karnataka Government has also been generous in spending its own resources on various nutrition schemes as well as ICDS.¹⁸

Similarly, the States of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh increased the number of Anganwadi centres constructed with approval from the MWCD in convergence with MGNREGA during 2015-2016¹⁹.

State Governments are also beginning to use technology for real time monitoring of the ICDS as seen in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and

¹⁶ UNICEF Annual Report 2017 India. https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/India_2017_COAR.pdf

¹⁷ Public Expenditure on Children in Karnataka 2001-2002 to – 2016-2017 : A Policy Brief Centre for Budget and Policy Studies and Unicef http://cbps.in/governance_accountability/updates-the-public-expenditure-on-children-in-karnataka

¹⁸ Public Expenditure on Child Nutrition in Karnataka Centre for Budget and Policy Studies and Unicef http://cbps.in/wp-content/uploads/Public-expenditure_Karnataka.pdf

¹⁹ Significant Achievements of Two Years 2014-2016 Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (2016) <http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/FINAL%20Achievement%20BOOKLET%20WCD%20%28Two%20Year%29.pdf>

Rajasthan which are covered under Information and Communication Technology enabled Real Time Monitoring (ICT-RTM) of ICDS for more efficient implementation of the NHM towards better nutrition of children under 6 years²⁰.

The States of Kerala and Gujarat in their respective RTE rules, also suggest the opening up of ECCE centres along with primary classes within three years of their notification. In the Kerala model of development, community action by the public has had a significant positive role to play. It is not only the community awareness, high education and literacy levels, and NGO action that led to progress on social indicators, but also the sense of community ownership of resources, evidenced in the sensitivity of people to ecological resources of the State. In Gujarat, rules stipulate that the State will identify an authority to oversee ECCE activities. Furthermore, NGOs in Gujarat (CHETNA²¹, SEWA²², ANANDI²³) have provided models of high quality care and education, working towards social equity and gender equality (Paul, Krishnan & Bikhchandani, 2016).

Gaps and bottlenecks in the system

An overview of the policy on ECCE in India, there seems to be a very strong commitment in place, and there are clear guidelines for ensuring high quality. Yet, when we analyse budget allocations and implementation strategies, it becomes clear that there are several critical gaps in making ECCE available to young children in the country.

Developmentally inappropriate activities

The downward extension of primary school i.e. using primary school curriculum for preschool classes and formal learning is a problem that relates to our insecurity as parents, families and society that if we leave it till too late, our children may get left behind. ECCE in the global scenario was spearheaded by concerns of children's development, a primarily future-orientation to ECCE. In a recent news article, an eminent educationist was quoted as having questioned if India is preparing its children for the new world, are children being "provided the skills" for contemporary career options as pre-schools were found to be primarily focussed on formal learning (The Hindu, August 04, 2018).

In a recent study done in three States, a large number of pre-school children didn't fulfil the required expectations (Kaul et al., 2017). Rather than a statement about the children, perhaps we need to say that pre-schools had failed to make a significant

²⁰ [Press Information Bureau Government of India](#)

²¹ Centre for Health, Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness

²² Self Employed Women's Association

²³ Area Networking and Development Initiatives

impact. In the above study, not even one classroom was found to have adequate arrangements for children's play and exploration. Activities were restricted to memorisation and formal tasks related to alphabets and numbers (NCERT, 2015).

Poor preparedness for school

As mentioned at the outset, school participation is an important objective of ECCE. Unfortunately, research findings related to preparedness and participation for school have also shown negative results. Reports highlight that a very large number of children come in with inadequate school preparedness, and they tend to continue to school with low learning levels and higher probability of dropping out in the early primary classes. Preschool centres are facing the problem of non-availability of teachers and inadequate infrastructure, especially in government sector. There is also a lack of national level standard pattern of ECCE that follows national guidelines but is also flexible enough to be contextualised and adapted by the implementers (Kaul et al, 2017). Perhaps more than asking whether children are ready for school we need to ask the reverse question, are schools ready for children? Do we even have enough schools?

Outreach and access

Issues of access (and outreach) if carefully studied have actually been issues of inclusion. When looked at in an inclusive manner, ECCE programs will not just reach out to the grassroots, the marginalized, culturally diverse groups, individuals with disabilities, and so on, but will involve beneficiaries in the actual planning and implementation of ECCE projects; thereby creating community ownership in a more involving sense. As soon as needs get created within the community contexts, so do the programs, enhancing outreach as an inbuilt program process component (Paul, Krishnan & Bhikchandani, 2016).

Poor funding

The ICDS is the largest and longest-standing nation-wide programme of ECCE. Several evaluations of the scheme have periodically highlighted the key problems in delivery of services. In this section, we look at the ICDS and its implementation to learn where the gaps lie. The India Early Childhood Education Impact (IECEI) study is a collaborative, three-tier longitudinal study between 2011 and 2016, to the understanding of ECE in rural India in three States (Kaul et al., 2017).

In summary, Anganwadis had inadequate facilities like buildings and water supply. A significant 40 percent of workers lived outside the village in spite of the fact that a

majority of them had been working for over 5 years (78%) and a significant 80 percent had received refresher training in the previous year. Immunisation and growth records were available at three quarters of the Anganwadis. In another study, it was found that a majority of the 60 AWWs mentioned they were overworked and reimbursements for expenses were frequently delayed. They also felt they were being paid poorly for the amount of work they were expected to do (Reddy, 2017).

A policy brief based on another assessment sponsored by UNICEF (Kaul et al., 2017) finds that four out of every seven children studied attended preschool centres. Despite that, children's participation does not follow a linear trajectory as prescribed by policy. Attendance in preschool centres often extends to 7 years of age and attendance in school stabilises only after 8. At age 5, preparedness for school is low, and preschool quality is poor and inappropriate, and as children grow older, there is a rising distance between expectations from children and their performance. The two major models for preschool are Government run Anganwadis and private preschools. Only a small percentage of centres are NGO (or religious group) run. ICDS centres have become locations for the dispersal of supplementary nutrition. Play is almost totally absent from both models (Anganwadi and private school) where predominantly formal teaching of reading and writing is being conducted.

In a recent position paper on ECCE by NCERT (2015), findings indicate that among other results, age of entry into preschool significantly impacts performance. If children join before 4 years of age, their long-term indicators are better, making a strong case for early entry into preschool. Positive indicators were also associated with income levels, social status and maternal and paternal educational levels.

This is the first rigorous evaluation of preschool services in India. These results contribute to the current literature on the private public learning gap in India, which have so far concentrated only on primary education. I believe it is possible that in the absence of data on preschool attendance, studies focusing on primary schooling in India could possibly wrongly attribute the difference in test scores to primary education. It could be the case that any such gap is due to differences in preschool attendance and that such divergences persist beyond preschool years into primary school. As such, one of the policy implications of a comprehensive exercise taking into account both preschool and primary school attendance, could be investment in preschool education for remediation of gaps in future outcomes.

Teacher training

Several research studies have highlighted the fact that good training of preschool teachers is a key element of good quality preschool programmes. In this regard, NGOs

like BODH and Mobile Creches have pioneered high quality training programmes for educators (Kaul et al., 2017).

Presently, the Nursery Teachers Training (NTT) courses offered by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) have limited seats and have not been able to meet the demand of the sector. In addition, the courses offered are of two years duration and it is difficult for the AWWs to enrol in the scheme (NCPCR, 2017). NCTE should prepare courses of around 6 months which can be taught on campus as well as online. This would help the existing AWWs and other caregivers to learn more about principles and delivery of ECCE.

National Institute for Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) is currently offering training courses for the AWWs which could be leveraged for the training of the private care givers of the private schools by NCTE (NIPCCD, n.d.). This collaboration would further enhance the quality of courses offered by NIPCCD. The training of ICDS functionaries is the most crucial component in ICDS Programme. The success of this programme depends on the effectiveness of frontline workers in empowering community for improved child care practices as well as effective inter-sectoral service delivery, however, the organisation is plagued by long delays and waiting periods for potential candidates.

With this aim in view, and with the objective of informing policy level reforms, a study was conducted to review the availability, coverage and nature of pre-service training for teacher education in ECCE in terms of access, facilities, curricula content and methods used, profile of teacher educators and perceptions of different stakeholders (CECED, 2010). Some options through distance education were also studied. Using survey research methods, and both primary and secondary sources, it was found that identification of institutions due to the absence of any reliable documentation was difficult. The sector is fairly unregulated and getting all institutions to respond to the research was challenging. Of the 367 institutions identified, 39 were visited and data from another 56 was gathered. A summary of the findings is listed below:

- Uneven distributions of institutions across States
- Some recent decline in enrolment reported in Maharashtra and Gujarat
- Despite rising demands for educators, absence of regulations for training period has impacted enrolment
- Negligible involvement of institutions of higher learning, which would greatly benefit training programmes
- Poor induction and training of teacher educators
- Urgent requirement of master trainers

The first step that the Government should take is to have a vision about the qualification of an ECCE worker and her supervisors. Following that, there is a need to set-up institutions that will provide this training. The existing DIET, SCERT or NIPCCD regional office will require revamping to become training institutes for preschool educators. Before an ECCE curriculum one needs a curriculum for the training of ECCE workers. It is essential to have a cadre of qualified ECCE workers that are recognised as a backbone of ECCE services.

Exclusion of children below six from RTE

Another important gap in the planning and delivery of ECCE is the omission of under sixes in the RTE Act, although some States like Kerala and Gujarat have provided guidelines for their inclusion. This is an important point where action needs to be taken, despite the fact that guidelines are in place.

Expectations from child care workers: Focussing on the Anganwadi

As mentioned in another study, heavy workload was the major perceived operational difficulty. In a study of ICDS services in the southern region of India, it was found that adequate staff, workspace, equipment, timely monthly honorarium were often lacking along with training and avoidance of non-ICDS duties would help in achieving the objectives of ICDS (Tripathy, Kamath, Baliga, & Jain, 2014).. More specifically, the research highlights the poor standard of records, although community relationships are maintained well. Health and nutrition services were effective although available stocks are poor. Almost half the centres had inadequate space and almost 40% workers were running the centres in their own homes. Drinking water facilities were available in most centres (around 87%) with poor sanitation recorded in around half the centres visited (NITI Aayog, 2015).

These research studies highlight gaps in the ICDS services that need to be addressed urgently.

Feeding here and studying there

The Anganwadi is also seen as a place where children receive food and it is quite common for families to send their children to the centre for supplementary feeding and then onto a private school for classes, even at a young age. This is based on the community's views about what is going on at the centre. A group of children engaged in informal play activities is often construed as waste of time, and private schools, interested in making profits, may resort to several strategies to attract children and also fulfil the objective of 'appearing' to teach children. In the absence of guidelines and monitoring of private preschools, such outcomes are inevitable. In one estimate, it was

found that more than half the children enrolled come to the Anganwadi for food alone (Khan, 2017). This indicates that the mid-day meal scheme has been a grand success in attracting students to the early childhood education (ECE) programme. Another 16% students have been admitted so that they can play, according to a joint report prepared by UNICEF, the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi, and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (Khan, 2017).

Inadequate supervision

The few days of training that an AWW receives before being placed at a centre with the promise of receiving support from Supervisors and the CDPO who themselves may not have the orientation and training for ECCE, results in a weak system. Furthermore, their work schedule and other responsibilities for record-keeping, supplementary nutrition onto which local demands for periodic work by administrators (elections, campaigns, and festivals) can leave them quite without time for working with children. In a recent study, it was found that in addition to poor focus on quality of services and lack of resources, the lack of educated workers at all levels, field and supervisory, was among the primary reasons for limited outcomes of ECCE centres. (CECED, 2017). SALARIES VARY IN DIFFERENT STATES AND LOWER SALARIES DO NOT ATTRACT PEOPLE.

Location of ECCE centres

Another gap is the location of the centres, and this often proves to be problem. As one study above showed, half of the centres studied were being run in the homes of the AWW. The problem associated with renting a place versus using one's own residence need to be studied carefully in order to come up with solutions that are most favourable for the children who are enrolled in the centre.

Community relations

The third major gap is the beliefs of parents. The community commonly has a vision of ECCE as a sort of school. This is probably why, parents sometimes prefer to enrol their children in private schools where they see evidence of studies being offered to young children. We need concerted action in this area. The vision of the ECCE centre has to expand beyond one where food is being provided, and secondly, the unnecessary comparison and competition with private schools leads to a preference for fee-paying centres.

In a recent report, it was quoted that the ICDS programme has failed to achieve desired outcomes like changing feeding behaviour of families and improving the

quality of preschool education, according to this evaluation paper of the programme (Rao & Kaul, 2017).

Support systems

Centres need the support of the local community, local NGOs as well as the Government infrastructure. Several studies have shown that such support is not always available, and as and when the community engagement is strong, there is a visible difference in the services available to children. Some States like Himachal Pradesh have shown strong mentoring programmes and involvement of academicians and local administrators that bring in new ideas and rigour to the programme. Scaling of mentoring is another issue. Organisations like Mobile Creches and BODH that have skill for in job training and provide constant support to their workers. These organisations can become more involved with innovations related to support systems, monitoring and evaluation.

Documenting good practices: Position papers, Resource materials, Case-studies

The situation of the young child in India is well-documented and advanced. There is a wide variety of materials available for free access on line in addition to institutional evaluations and regular reports within the system. In this section, we will highlight the sources available for

Institutional support for ECCE comes from several different sources including: Central Government (The Constitution, MHRD, DWCD) 86th amendment, Autonomous Institutions under Central Government (NIPCCD, NCERT), University supported institutions (CECED), Academic associations (AECED) and NGOs (National and International)

Position papers

Our institutions have kept a regular focus on international and national developments in the field of ECCE in terms of policy, planning and implementation. Periodic reports from these organisations are easily accessible to see The National Focus Group on ECE released a position paper on ECCE (adding the critical dimension of Care to its agenda) which outlines need for a critical examination of

Resource materials

Books and reports

In 2014, UNICEF released a pictorial handbook for practitioners which presents a colourful display of pictures along with research based findings (from Pratham, ASER and Ambedkar University and in collaboration with NIPCCD and National Core Group on ECCE) regarding elements of quality in ECCE. The handbook is freely available online²⁴ for anyone to access and use and meant for practitioners and parents alike, and is available in Hindi and English. The highlights of this handbook are that it is readable, concise and deals with a whole range of issues related to young children's development and care. The guidelines to practitioners emphasises the importance of community relations and also encourages the inclusion of fathers in the programme. Guidance is also provided to the educators on how to interact with children and what sort of activities to plan for them. This is a resource that should be used widely. Another important resource is Swaminathan's Play activities for child development, published by National Book Trust (Swaminathan, 2009). It provides simple and effective games and play activities that parents and teachers can draw from in their engagement with children. There are a whole range of materials such as these that are very valuable for adults working with children that can be used for ECCE.

CECED Reports

The Centre for Early Childhood Care, and Education of the Ambedkar University along with the National Association for Early Childhood education holds regular conferences and brings out reports related to research findings, policy trends and programme evaluations. Such resources, like the proceedings of the recently concluded conference on Every Child's Right to ECD are important sources for airing debates and discussions related to ECCE. These must find wide distribution among practitioners of ECCE.

ASER (Annual Status of Education Report)

The ASER²⁵ centre was established in the year 2008, finding its roots in the work of Pratham, the NGO. A declared objective of ASER (meaning impact) is accountability to the public. Given the large amount of funding being spent on the education sector, ASER promises to fulfill the requirement of auditing these investments on a regular basis through measurement. The basic objectives of these periodic measurements is to understand, communicate and consequently change the way in which learning

²⁴ <http://www.nipccd-earchive.wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/PDF/321%20ECCEHandbook.pdf>

²⁵ <http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/329.html>

happens in the classroom. ASER surveys are household-based rather than school-based, thereby accessing children in different types of schools as well as those who have never been or dropped out from school. Data is available from rural districts of the country, and most significantly for our purpose, includes children above three years of age as well, although the results are primarily targeted towards nation-wide learning outcomes of school participation. The ASER model has been adopted in several other countries like Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Pakistan, Mali and Senegal.

Blogs

There are several important resources available online apart from official reports and guidebooks. I want to take the example of Education Matters²⁶. I will pick one of the posts by the author titled “Three simplest and least expensive ways to improve learning in children”. Shukla (2014) cuts right through the materials, resources and infrastructure issues that often create bottlenecks for child-friendly approaches to classroom interactions and urges the reader to: Smile more, Talk with and listen more to children, and lastly, imagine yourself as a child in front of you to imagine how you would like the session to proceed. The blog has a wide range of resources freely available to the public with regular updates if you are a follower. It is a priceless collection of stories about and from classrooms that all adults will greatly benefit from.

Recent developments: Samagra Siksha Abhiyan²⁷

The Department of School Education and Literacy of the MHRD, recently released the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan scheme. The objectives of this scheme under the Union Budget (2018-2019) proposes to consolidate education services at all levels: from pre-nursery to Class 12 under one umbrella, subsuming the three schemes: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education (TE). A primary focus of this consolidation is the attempt to streamline implementation and financial provisions. The vision of the Scheme is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education from pre-school to senior secondary stage in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for Education. The common objectives of all the Schemes are to enhance access through the expansion of quality school education; to promote equity through the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and weaker sections, and to improve the quality of education for all by shifting the focus from project objectives to improving systems and schooling outcomes by providing incentives to States for improving the quality of education being provided in schools.

Reducing gaps based on gender, region, ethnicity and ability, ensuring the quality of schools, promoting relevance of schooling and supporting the implementation of RTE

²⁶ <http://subirshukla.blogspot.com/>

²⁷ <http://samagra.mhrd.gov.in/about.html>

and strengthening local bodies like DIETs and SIE (State Institutes of Education) and SCERTs are some of the listed objectives of the scheme. Thus by consolidating of the different schemes and efforts in the field of education and strengthening the system, the focus is on access, equity and relevance of the school experience for India's children.

It is proposed that the scheme will be centrally sponsored by the Department through a single State Implementation Society (SIS) at the State/UT level. At the National level, there would be a Governing Council headed by Minister of Human Resource Development and a Project Approval Board (PAB) headed by Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy.

Financial and other implementation will come under the Governing Council which will be empowered to initiate innovations and interventions. A Technical Support Group (TSG) will assist the Government Department at Educational Consultants of India Limited (EdCIL) to provide technical support in functional areas pertaining to the objectives.

Although the scheme addresses education as a whole, there are several important points that relate specifically to the young child and ECCE. Here is a list of the relevant points related to ECCE:

1. Consolidation of all Government funded preschool programmes: Anganwadi, Balwadi, nursery, preschool, preparatory, pre-primary, LKG, UKG, play centres, crèches, Bal Vatikas
2. Bringing preschool programmes within the campus of schools wherever possible
3. Special training initiatives for ECCE staff
4. Involvement of Institutions of Higher Education, strengthening exiting linkages and building new ones
5. Development of age appropriate programmes and materials

In conclusion, the scheme is powerful and a step in the right direction, a powerful initiative by the Government Departments concerned. It is very favourable to have shifted focus from Education for All (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) with attempts at universal coverage in terms of age and diversity to graded continuity from early to higher level of education, it should not remain as another way of looking at and treating the same (education) scenario. The new scheme, if successfully implemented, can strengthen the academic continuity component, thereby reducing school dropout, and promoting skill

building and knowledge based empowerment of children and youth. Such a continuum of educational and academic attention towards the young was in order and long due. It would also provide an opportunity for academic trainers and researchers to study children and their learning at school longitudinally, thereby providing valuable data and strengthening opportunities for all-round academic provisioning.

Much now depends on the ways in which the Centre and States will pick up the scheme and carry it through. There should be some mention of how the scheme should be monitored to ensure its successful application, some accountability or evaluation procedures for States and Centre must be taken to ensure that the investment is bearing fruit. The focus on inclusion of children with special needs and on reading and the slogan *Padhe bharat badhe bharat*, and the extra attention to the setting up of library facilities is another positive step. Provisions for combining preschool and school infrastructures is a positive step since it will ease access and sibling support. It is far more convenient for families to have children of all ages at a single point location, and one can see that the requirements of the family have been considered in this scheme and not only what is in the “child’s best interest” as it is imagined by policy makers. The results from Sikkim reported in the proposal document show a significant shift from private to Government schools in the State following the combining of preschools with later schools. The focus on safety, sanitation and security are well-taken.

It is also felt that residential schools as an option for remote areas is problematic. Residential schools can be a problem, moving children out of their homes at an early age (and even later) exposes them to risk. Recent cases of institutions are a case in point. A much more favourable option is to have local teachers or residence for teachers as proposed. Transportation is another issue which can be difficult to monitor in terms of safety, but it is possible to consider. Regarding EWS in private fee-paying schools, although certainly an option, EWS has not shown very positive results in major cities as it tends to perpetuate rather than reduce the gap between income levels. Several reports of under-reporting and under-utilisation have been publicised in the press²⁸. Another important concern is that the inclusion of preschools should not undermine the importance of keeping the young child at home for the longest possible time during early childhood.

²⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/edu-dept-to-prepare-list-recommend-ews-children-to-private-schools/>
<https://indianexpress.com/about/ews/>

Case-studies

ECCE services in India are offered under several different schemes, the ICDS, private schools, and centres run by NGOs, experimental schools run by academic institutions, day-care programmes and crèches, as well as international agencies. A lot has been written about private schools in the earlier sections, and it needs to be acknowledged that they are important players in the field of ECCE. NGO's come forward to complement the public education system and to improve its effectiveness, sometimes offering services to clients who are unreachable by the Government system. This is especially true for children with disability. The experimental approaches of the NGOs have successfully tackled many shortcomings in schooling and innovative models help in provide new solutions in ECCE (Jagannathan, n.d.).

The role of international aid agencies enters in policy, planning and implementation with the support for research, training, funding, materials and implementation of existing schemes of ECCE. Agencies like UNICEF, Ford Foundation, WHO, CARE, Save the Children, Christian Children's Fund, among others. Their contribution to ECCE is significant.

NGOs are keen to establish partnerships with the Government to share their models however, the Government is yet to recognize NGOs as credible institutions and full-fledged partners. Collaboration with NGOs has tended to be fragmented, although some significant beginnings have been in national-level concerns with the initiative taken by academic institutions like the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, New Delhi). Autonomous institutions like NIPCCD, National and State branches in the ICDS programme is also noteworthy.

Research highlights the need for an "institutional mechanism" for GOI-NGO dialogue that lends credibility and independence to NGO action (Jagannathan, n.d.). The NGOs surveyed in this study have the possibility to evolve from being participants to partners in the field of education in general and ECCE in particular. Significant contributions by NGOs have been found in schooling, children of employed mothers, children in difficult circumstances, children with disability, urban poor communities, remote villages and tribal areas. This study found that NGOs have demonstrated that targeted actions are required for specific deprived groups, for instance, the urban poor, child workers or street children. Improving access to schooling is limited primarily by lack of good quality schools rather than motivation. There is a strong demand for schools among the poor, but unfortunately, if all children would demand entry into schools, there aren't enough schools available. Organisations like The MV Foundation, Pratham and BODH have demonstrated that even among the very poor, families are eager and willing to contribute towards school participation for their children. The main challenges are in providing available and accessible schools and sustaining children's interest. In this

regard, NGOs can and do play a significant role by providing special attention to first generation learners, over-age entrants and primary school retention. Providing ECCE services is also another significant role played by NGOs, one that provides support to the entry into and participation in school.

Another key factor of NGO involvement in ECCE is commitment to the community. Instances of innovative and experimental programme run by organisations like BODH, MC, Pratham, Balwadis sponsored by Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, Government of Andhra Pradesh, and Ka Shreni centres attached to Government primary schools in Assam, among others. These organisations keep a very close contact with the community. In the case of BODH for instance, mother teachers are the backbone of their ECCE programme and many of them are former students of the programmes in which they work. They have intimate knowledge of the community and provide a key link between the organisation and centres, the study found (Chaudhary, Shukla & Tomar, 2013; Kaul, Chaudhary & Sharma, 2015).

NGOs also provide a successful model where voluntary teachers and para teachers can assist in reducing costs of a programme in areas where such people are available and where it is possible. The NGOs pioneered the concepts of the voluntary teacher and the alternative school to counter teacher absenteeism and to make appropriate education available for out of school children. Furthermore, alternative schools established with community support receive less infrastructure support and less qualified teachers. But although these low-cost options can be tried, they must not be adopted for the risk of dilution of the importance of good salaries, adequate training and education of teachers (Jagannathan, n.d.). Links between the different service providers, NGOs, private schools, Government agencies and others is an urgent need of ECCE services in the country. For this purpose, the Government, both State and Central, needs to take the initiative to provide common forums for dialogue and collaboration.

Success stories in India relate to programmes innovative experiments with existing centres or independent programmes run by NGOs. Many organizations have been working with ICDS programs and MWCD is also actively inviting participation of NGOs to carry out ICDS training through the recently launched Management Information System (MIS) portal for Anganwadi Services Training Programme (MWCD, 2018). Mobile Crechesin collaboration with NGOs, local bodies and communities works with settlements in Delhi to directly provide child care services through replicable models, strengthen ICDS programme for better quality and coverage and raise awareness of child care issues (Mobile Crèches, n.d). Pratham works with preschool age children and families through their Balwadi program actively involving mothers. They also work with the government by providing training, mentoring and onsite support to ICDS Anganwadi workers across India (Pratham, n.d).

In Rajasthan, Bodh Shiksha Samiti works intensively with selected hamlets of extremely backward communities to spread awareness on the early years and the importance of education by jointly setting up bodhshalas with the community (Bodh, n.d). Anganwadi@17000ft has been setting up Model ECE (Early Childhood Education) centres in partnership with Vikramshila in Leh district to create safe and supportive learning environments for children environment in the early years (17000ft, n.d). The Anganwadi Project (TAP) works in partnership Manav Sadhna to design and build safe and beautiful yet low cost preschools using re-cycled materials in the slums of Ahmedabad by recruiting and training Australian design professionals who volunteer in India to oversee the design and construction of these schools (Anganwadi Project, n.d).

The Pratham Initiative

The Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative spearheaded a movement towards universalising primary education for all children in 1990s. The organisation was a charitable trust and with support of UNICEF, initiated a campaign to all children in Mumbai city into schools. Addressing the total lack of pre-school facilities for the urban deprived in Mumbai, a few Balwadis were started in 1995 (Jagannathan, n.d.).

Pratham has developed an effective, low-cost model for a community-based ECCE centre. A fee is collected from each child, which goes towards the salary of the instructor, and the community contributes towards the space in which the centre is run. Promising young teachers are recruited from the local community and after a training programme, they are posted as preschool teachers at the Balwadis. Appropriate learning materials and teaching aids are provided. This low-cost model runs at an expense of Rs. 4,500 per Balwadi and includes the instructor fee (partial), materials, support cost, training cost and overall monitoring cost. It is claimed that the model is replicable at a cost of Rs. 250 per child, per year. The strongest allies of the programme are the local youth. Linkages with local play schools is an area of expansion that will facilitate children's movement into schools and coordination between services within a particular region.

BODH

Bodh Shiksha Samiti started its first school in 1987 as a result of a partnership between the Gokulpuri, an urban community and a group of social activists. The fundamental belief behind this organisation is the commitment the community and the fact that quality education is a right and deprived communities and can make it a reality for their children. Today, through Bodhshalas and Government schools, Bodh reaches out to more than 26,000 children in both urban and rural areas of Jaipur and Alwar. Bodh is

recognised not only as a pioneer in the field of education for the urban deprived but it has a name as a resource agency for providing training by focusing on aspects such as child centred pedagogy, community involvement in education (Chaudhary, Shukla & Tomar, 2013).

Mobile Creches

Mobile Creches(MC) was founded in 1969 with small beginnings, setting up Creches for children of migrant workers who were found to be playing among the debris. As an idea, this has not only survived but expanded over the last 49 years into a pioneer institution and a leader in the field of ECCE (Mobile Crèches, n.d.). MC works in 7 settlements in Delhi with a population of 40,000, and there is active collaboration with NGO networks, local bodies and people's representatives to implement programmes that provide and strengthen the provision of good quality child care services. The agenda is to create and raise awareness about issues related to children, build groups and organise campaigns related to the cause of children's welfare, facilitate young families to adopt best child care practices, deliver comprehensive services for young children through a replicable and comprehensive model and strengthen the quality and coverage of the ICDS programme as a leading Governmental programme for children.

International NGOs

The partnership between UNICEF and the Government of India spans six decades initiated through an agreement in May 1949, later amended in April 1978. Currently the Government collaborates with UNICEF five-year Country Programme Action Plans (CPAP). Other International agencies that collaborate with the Indian Government include Department for International Development, Govt. of United Kingdom (DFID) that provides technical assistance to ICDS in three States (Odisha, MP and Bihar) and also at the central level to support in ICDS (MWCD, 2017).

World Food Programme (WFP) that provides technical assistance to the Ministry in ICDS implementation and central activities. A Country Strategic Plan (CSP) 2015-18 has been signed between Government of India and UN World Food Programme in August 2015. A Sub-group of Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG) has been constituted under the Chairpersonship of Director General, Central Statistics Office (CSO) for guidance.

The Bernard Van Leer Foundation (BVLFF) has provided research support for testing models of mother-tongue based ECCE in Odisha, and work with the MWCD (in collaboration with BVLFF) to take the programme models to scale, training over 8,000 AWWs and supervisors engaged in working with children across the State.

Other dimensions of good practice: State specific initiatives

In this section, we will examine State specific initiatives in the field of ECCE delivery of services. The ICDS has six main components: Supplementary Nutrition, Immunisation, Health Check-up, Referral Services, Non-formal Pre-school Education, and Nutrition and Health Education. The first component, Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP), requires the supply of food for cooking to Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) across the country. However, the implementation of this programme suffers from corruption, pilferage and delays. Under this centralised system, AWWs did not have any control over the quantity and quality of the supplies. Poor quality of grains was a frequent problem and the supply of rice stock for three months at time created storage problems. With reference to ICDS, orders were issued by the Supreme Court in 2001 and 2004, followed by a landmark judgment in 2006 to ensure a time-bound 'universalisation with quality'. A minimum nutrition provision that must be guaranteed under ICDS was prescribed. It was further argued that decentralisation of procurement by eliminating contractors and encouraging the engagement of local SHGs and Mahila Mandals in supply and distribution would be more favourable for the system and services.

Reorganising the delivery system: Odisha

Following the Supreme Court order, the Odisha Government took steps in April 2011 to reform and revitalise the ICDS delivery system through decentralisation. In the new system, all materials except rice and wheat would be procured locally by AWWs to reduce chances of pilferage during transportation. In addition, a system was devised to allow greater participation of the local community in the implementation of services (UNDP, 2017).

Community participation in implementation: Jammu and Kashmir

Engaging the community in the implementation of programmes generates acceptance, trust, and accountability. Such a partnership is likely to enhance sustainability and community participation. In the ICDS programme, the decentralisation of procurement to local Self-Help Groups (SHGs) was found to result in lower costs for the State Government while also generating jobs. Also, hiring local people can further increase the involvement and ownership of services. The example of the Himayat initiative in Jammu and Kashmir was found to be crucial in the acceptance of the skill training and job placement programme in a region plagued by strife (NITI Aayog, 2015).

Decentralisation and convergence: Odisha

Moving decisions about planning and implementation processes to local sites can ensure better identification of problems and assist in lowering the cost of a service. Furthermore, efficiency is likely to be improved when there is an ownership of any given set of services by increasing local commitment to the cause and enabling better monitoring. As the Odisha example shows, the decentralisation of ICDS services in Odisha State has had several positive outcomes. The removal of middlemen has made the system more transparent and improved the satisfaction of beneficiaries.

Different goals; Similar strategies

In 2013, CECED assembled the findings from a nationwide qualitative study to document lessons from case-studies of programmes known to have effective ECCE programmes. One of the primary results of the study was that there are multiple pathways to successful programming. With vastly different starting points, numbers, objectives and funding, these organisations had all taken a different route to success. What was common among them was a commitment to children (Chaudhary 2013). In order to illustrate the different starting point, it was documented that the organisations were driven by different objectives. It was found that having by examining the programmes as case-studies, it became possible to look at the pathway of each. Furthermore, even the focus of each of the institutions was different, as was the organisational structure. What emerged as a common factor was the unwavering commitment of a group of people towards whatever they had chosen as their goals, whether it was democratic principles, community involvement or eradication of poverty. This is the list of objectives that the different ECCE programmes had a central commitment to. ECCE was one of the central ways of achieving their goals and not a goal in itself.

- Democratic principles, rights of every citizen
- Eradication of poverty, arresting dropouts
- Community involvement
- Preschool education
- Large scale plans of getting children to school
- Every child in school
- Community welfare

Some additional notes

While focusing in specific points of intervention where there is greater need, it is important to keep some points in mind. Just as cultural diversity is an important dimension of reality as we have noted multiple times, the issue of gender is another concern. We may be faced with the danger of creating a gender divide, albeit in the favour of girls. All social messages and media platforms talk about education for girls, and we risk losing sight of boys as an unintended consequence. In promoting gender equity in education we need to emphasize equally on boys and girls. "Catch-up growth" for one sex does not mean that we forget nourishing the other. Similarly, the inclusion of men in ECCE campaigns is another linked issue that needs attention.

In planning for ECCE the existing economic divide is important to consider in terms of investment and cost-benefit analysis. Let us say that for families with sufficient resources the movement outside home for a young child will most likely be for social interaction and opportunities for expanding physical and cognitive experiences. Although not to be ignored for wealthier families, there is a need to provide extra focus on nourishment, health, space and hygiene to supplement home experiences. This is important to understand and consider in the differential provision of services and experiences that we plan for children in different sections of society to ensure cost-effective solutions.

Families with young children gain knowledge and information from observing and interacting with others, including 'experts' in the field as the child moves out of the home. These connection will expand the world of the child as well as that of the family. Families gain access to other languages, customs, cultures, and alternate ways of living. This is a valuable outcome of a child's engagement with education at all ages. Education centres at all ages can become hub for a one point provision of services for children. This can happen effectively when the government school system is expanded in coverage and clientele, but until then, partnership with private schools can also be possible. Furthermore, when children attend a program then it also becomes possible to notice abuse – physical, sexual, emotional or injury and neglect, nutritional status – malnutrition or obesity, health, developmental delays by non-family member or expert, although any or all of these can also happen within a programme and young children are especially vulnerable. This is why it becomes imperative to ensure security and safety of children when we advocate for ECCE because there is nothing more distressing than abuse of children by those who are responsible for their welfare, whether it is the family or a teacher.

We need to remember that although many children are outside of school because they are unable to make it for some reason or other, many are unable to get in even when they want to, and many are pushed out either on account of frequent

movement, failure to fit in, irregular participation or negative attitudes by the educator. While consolidating an overview of out-of-school children, the blame for the phenomenon has to be shared, with the institutional setting being as responsible as the participants, if not more! This becomes even more serious in the neglect of children with disability, who have, most often, not even been able to enter the system.

The provision of childcare for employed mothers is an especially important feature of ECCE and cannot be emphasised enough, especially for the most vulnerable category of families, poor migrant workers. Not only do children find themselves removed from the register of schools in their native home, there is absolutely no opportunity for the child of a migrant family working temporarily in a rural or urban project. This group of children continues to stay outside of school at all ages. This is also the group at risk of exploitation, abuse and peer difficulties. Perhaps Mobile Creches is one of the very few organisations that has made provisions for this section of society that is in dire need of support.

For most of the developed world, the early introduction to technology has become a bane, and several important research studies are talking about the negative impact of early exposure to the screen. For the poor on the other hand, this may not be the problem, and technology can actually assist services in important ways through accessing information, networking and contacting people.

ECCE centres can also be very good for releasing older children (girls and boys) for school participation in families where children provide care for their younger siblings, and when the school and ECCE centre are in the same compound, this is even more favourable for the family. At this point, we need to reiterate that the child is part of a cohort, and horizontally linked with its peers, but the vertically linked with later childhood. Thus, in order to best present ECCE to the community, horizontal, holistic and vertical connections are important to consider. This would include looking at the child as a whole, with all the different developmental domains, as well as her linkages with other children of the same age and her own later childhood and adolescence.

Key lessons and recommendations

Some of the key lessons derived from this extensive study of global and local research on ECCE highlight that there a lot that has been accomplished in the name of ECCE by way of schemes, reports, evaluations and recommendations. The latest scheme of the MHRD Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan illustrates the consistent and continued commitment of the Government to the cause of the young child. However, far more investment has gone into policy and planning, monitoring and evaluation than to implementation and enhancement, and this is posed to change in the most recent policy statements, especially implementation from the perspective of children living in difficult

circumstances. Despite the elaborate literature and abundance of documentation, the local concerns of the young child and a culturally relevant position on ECCE is weak.

We have also learnt that initiatives for young children's welfare can come from divergent objectives (women's work, democratic principles, poverty alleviation, improved schooling). Furthermore, investment in ECCE is taken for granted and not enough reflection has gone into why we are doing this. Debates on this need to continue to justify investments.

Recommendations:

Based on our detailed examination of research, policy, implementation, observation and analysis, here are some of the key recommendations for ECCE services:

1. In order to accomplish coverage, accountability as well as cultural relevance, ECCE services must provide for flexibility within a standard framework. This will ensure a basic range of services, as well as assure that local social practices are attended to in meaningful ways. There are several instances of successful programmes that can be used as role models for attaining this objective.
2. We need to ensure coverage of the remotest of locations between the desert communities of Ladakh, the salt mining areas in Gujarat and the islands of Andaman and Nicobar. Presently, we do not have enough schools for the number of children, and the long and arduous procedures for school admission can be daunting for families. We need ease and guarantee of access before we can move forward. The presence and availability of and access to good quality schools within the government system is perhaps the most urgent need and these schools (along with preschools) can go a long way in accessing out of school children and ensuring their participation. Unlike what is believed, schooling is a high priority for most parents. However, parents' expectations from preschool need to be debated and discussed since their notions of ECCE may be more school-like in their expectations.
3. The inclusion of under 6s needs to be further debated by giving due consideration to the responsibility we have as educators, to bring young children into the fold of extra-familial care at this early age.
4. The issues of language need discussion. In doing so, we have to consider several factors like the capacities of children, language environment, aspirations of parents as well as the objectives of education. There are no simple answers to the issue of language and as a country whose multilingual nature is an enduring feature and a strong advantage, providing the opportunity for the child to speak his or her native language(s) and learn others is a responsibility of schooling at all ages. The early introduction of the English language, a common expectation of families, is one other issue that needs inputs from experts.

5. The proposal of bringing preschools into the fold of the school outlined in the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan will have several consequences, both for small, innovative programmes as well as for schools. This needs further discussion and research to see how children adjust and what options are possible in the different regions of the country. As far as private fee-paying schools are concerned, the movement to attach preschools to the larger school system has been at least three decades old, a point at which smaller (feeder) preschools lost their clientele and decided to go even lower for the age at entry. There are many advantages to this merger, not the least of which is having a one point location where the children of a family can go for schooling and ECCE and long term placement in schools. But for this to work, there must be enough schools available for all children, which is far from the reality right now.
6. **A parallel cadre of Bal Vikas worker** (Child Development worker) matching the AWW with role specific to health and nutrition and monitoring would greatly enhance service delivery. This Bal Vikas Worker should be trained for roles and responsibilities specifically for Child Development. Leadership for training of Bal Vikas workers can be initiated by NGOs with strong Child Development initiatives.
7. As **educators**, the understanding, acceptance, and respect for diversity is a key issue that has emerged. This is something that needs urgent work, especially during training and implementation. Presently, educators largely feel as if they are above the learners in social status, and therefore, negative attitudes begin to emerge under these conditions. For both social and individual diversity, educators need intense training and monitoring. Educators in turn need the support and guidance from people they work among. Presently, links with the community is mostly transacted with the view to their “upliftment”, from a position of privilege rather than a perspective of equity and service. The importance of each child as a significant member of the group with equal rights and entitlements, endowed with the ability to learn, regardless of individual differences and capacities, is a stance that is often lost in the delivery of services. We have to ensure that when children are welcomed into any programme, they come with inalienable rights as members of society and citizens of the county.

Furthermore, educators are responsible for attention to details like:

- Tracking children's development
 - Planning individualized goals and community objectives of relevance to ECCE
 - Updating knowledge and skills through dialogue and discourse
 - Discuss the science and ethics of ECCE practices
8. As programme organisers, a regular contact with educators and the community is crucial. As can be seen in some successful models of ECCE like BODH Shiksha Samiti, democratic principles and commitment to the community urges the organisers to keep a close watch on the transaction of educational services to

children. Teachers do not come custom designed as perfect educators, they have to be provided with an environment where mutual respect and commitment thrives towards them, so that they can work with those principles in the classroom. Participation in centre-level activities is key to keeping in close touch with the people and the programme. A small gesture of playful engagement by someone in authority can go a long way in establishing comfort in the community as well as the practitioners. Furthermore planning visits to and interactions with others is another important activity that keeps children and educators motivated. It is also the organisers' responsibility to ensure that social justice and community welfare are the bases for programme effectiveness.

9. **The State:** Here we include both central and state level governance. One of the first responsibilities of the State is to ensure that good quality government schools are available for all children. Furthermore, government and public sector employees must compulsorily enroll their children into these schools so that quality is ensured with a single stroke. School participation in later years is enhanced not just by providing ECCE services as we have been repeatedly told in the arguments for ECCE. School participation is first and most importantly guaranteed by availability, access and admission into good schools. Everything else will follow, including participation in ECCE. Support for ECCE, selection, training and work conditions are the responsibility of the State, as is the functioning and coordination of the programmes.

Way forward

The delivery of educational services including ECCE is in need of a reboot by returning to the basic principles of education, the needs of young children and the participation of children in society. In this regard, the first way forward is a re-look at the ideology of intervention. Placing the participant as a beneficiary has not helped with the way ECCE has progressed. We have to take the approach of a basic service that we are obliged to provide to children, for their present circumstances as well as for the future. Ideologically, we would include the following principles:

- Mutual regard between community and service through incorporating local cultural practice, art, craft and environment
- Respect for others, humanism rather than philanthropy
- Social justice in place of social work
- Understanding poverty, its reasons
- Regular review of the rationale and contemporary status of ECCE
- Clear understanding about the science and ethics of ECCE, school education

- A focus on disadvantage and disability
- Community ownership: Going beyond participation
- Reducing the home-school distance, physically, socially and ideologically
- Ensure regularity
- Ensure equity, have the same programmes for children from different groups by having neighbourhood schools for all
- Family welfare, the family is an important part of a child's life and they are partners in the well-being of children and therefore also need to be actively involved with programmes
- Mentoring rather than monitoring
- Periodic audit of the fundamental services to make sure that there is a benefit for every rupee spent
- **Partnerships** between all the sectors NGO, GO, Private schools, International NGOs
- Expanding the classroom to include local arts and culture.

Final words

In this chapter, we focused on the current status of Early Childhood Education and Care in India. It is essential to understand that we are a nation of immense diversity and unevenness in the accessibility and availability to resources. This is a key fact in understanding that provisions of educational services including ECCE to all children is a responsibility. Uneven economic development has a significant bearing on childhoods and education is one of the strongest methods of addressing the issue. Unless schools are available to everyone, with easy access, admission and participation, keeping all ethnic, social and economic factors in mind, unless children are welcomed in school, our objective of progress through this method is unlikely to bear fruit. Good quality ECCE has to be followed up with good schooling, otherwise children's later needs towards sustainability will not be fulfilled. Such services are also an important space for ensuring that all children are adequately nourished and health care is provided. There is an urgent need to consolidate the different services available to children and the school and ECCE centre are appropriate locations for that. Having a Bal Vikas worker in every community who is trained and motivated in the objectives of childhood care and education will be an important addition to the cadre of child care workers. For this purpose, consolidating the diverse service providers is an important next step. For this purpose ICDS and government schools have to be strengthened in order to have nation-wide impact. These programmes are already in place in so many locations, we need to work at getting to every child there is and revisiting and revamping these institutions towards high quality, safe, secure and child friendly centres where multiple services are provided. For instance, tracking of children for the first 1000 days after birth is something that can be accomplished through this service and can go a long way in

impacting survival and health status. The child needs to be tracked from this intense supervision in the early days till the completion of school and even later. Consolidating multiple services is a key strategy of achieving the objective of no child being left behind, and no child should be separated (physically, socially or ideologically) from his family and community! Indian children live with many disadvantages of poverty, ill-health and poor nutrition, but they mostly live in a large social network, any ECCE programme has to recognize, respect and include this larger social network of people, adults and children.

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