



Changing wave of Early Childhood Care and Education in India: NEP 2020 policy perspective

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the critical issues in early childhood care and education as outlined in National Education Policy 2020. Through the review of past policy documents, themes such as the curricular and pedagogical reforms, teacher training, convergence and co-location and so on were identified and reflected on. The paper also outlines the issues and challenges in its implementation.*

Key words: *National Education Policy, Early Childhood Care and Education, Foundational Stage, Preschool education*

Evolutionary journey: An insight into policy initiatives

Early stimulation in the life of a child is one of the most critical issues that policy makers envision. This is why, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is of increasing importance to India, as indicated by two chapters in the recently published National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. The 2020 policy acknowledged the significance of ECCE in school education and dedicated a chapter focussing on ECCE provisions and implementation for improving quality education. Even though it has found a prominent place in NEP 2020 however, it can't be said that it had no footprint in earlier educational policies in India.

Early Childhood Education found mentioning past documents like the Constitution of India (Amended Article 45), The National Policy on Education, (1986 & 1992), National Policy for the Child, (1974), National Plan of Action (NPA), (1992) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009). The pioneer document that explicitly emphasized upon ECCE was the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy along with the National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework (2013). The 2013 policy and framework detailed out the need, scope and quality of Early Childhood Education and development in India for the children from birth to 6 years of age. Through these policies and acts, India recognized the need for access to quality ECCE in India for improving educational quality index at par the global educational index. In 2015, United Nations launched Sustainable Development agenda where all member states moved towards common understanding for a sustainable model for present and future generation. Thus ensuring access to quality ECCE became an integral part of the newly formulated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since India is signatory of United Nation's SDGs, therefore providing holistic development to young children becomes one of the commitments of the State. The target 4.2 of the SDGs states "by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education"

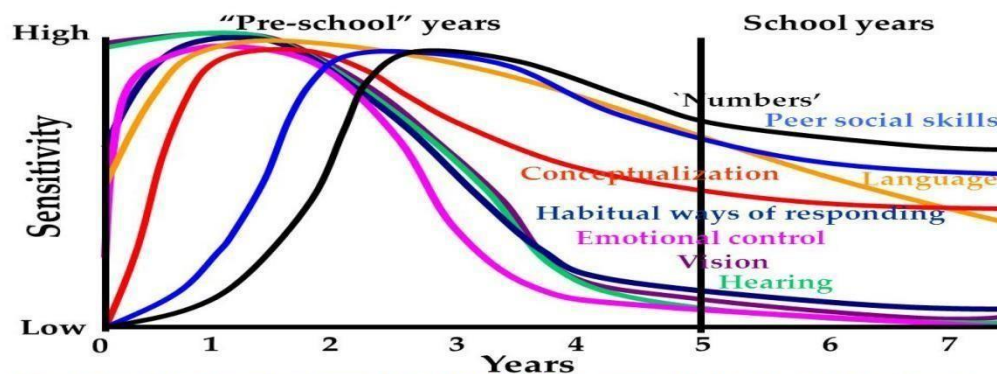


Heckman's (2003,2006,2008) work also showed that the rate of return to primary schooling increase when a country invests in the care and education of very young children. Thus, international organizations such as UNICEF, World Bank Group, UNESCO and WHO have also invested extensively in improving ECCE due to its higher economic returns. It can be said that Indian government also realized the high returns of ECCE for improving the economy which is reflected in the newly launched policy document.

Early year interventions and investment for future: Cognitive science perspective

ECCE is recognized as one of the most crucial stages in a child's life. The first eight years in the life of a child are crucial for their holistic development. Several studies (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Rushton, 2011; Loeb & Bassok, 2012;) in neurosciences support that good early childhood development lays the foundation for a healthy, well-integrated adult, gives the next generation a better start and contribute to economic growth and sustainable development. Additionally, ECCE has shown high returns on investment upon an individual, as well as, at societal level (Mustard, 2002; Heckman, 2008). Thus, the first 1000 days of a child's life have a great deal of potential for laying the foundation for lifelong health. Proper nutrition, secure relationships, and a responsive environment etc. contribute to such harmonious development. From cognitive science perspective, it is considered that the brain develops around 85% during the first five years. The critical or sensitive phases also occur during this time (Karoly et al., 1998; Shonkoff, 2009; UNESCO 2007). This can be seen in the figure depicted below (figure-1). The graph indicates that the most critical period for brain development pertaining to different domains of development occurs between birth and 5 years of age, well before children even start school, whereas learning continues well into the school years. This is called the Continuum of Learning and Development, a prominent feature of the early years of life. From a neuroscience standpoint, there is evidence that learning is connected across age groups. Synaptic connections are built in this age group, so early experiences and learning have an everlasting impact on an individual.

'Sensitive periods' in early brain development



Source: Graph developed by Council for Early Child Development (ref: Nash, 1997; *Early Years Study*, 1999; Shonkoff, 2000.)

National Education Policy 2020 seems to have recognized and emphasized the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education which we do not find explicitly mentioned in earlier educational policies in India. It is highly commendable that the document mentions 0-3 years as well. Besides making some critical observations about early childhood education in India, the policy document emphasized the need for relevant, appropriate intervention for children at an early age. Furthermore, the policy document extends the RTE Act 2009 to include children of 3-6 years, affirming the child's rights and defining early childhood education up to the age 8 years –thus the policy acknowledges the transition years in the early life of a child. However, there are certain points that need deeper thought and clarification for the universalization of Early Childhood Education in India as the author believes. These points, as discussed under



sub-headings below are crucial to take into consideration while translating the policy into curriculum and making it more specific and impactful.

Early Childhood Care and Education as painted in NEP 2020:

The age-group:

The dichotomy of Indian and global distinction in context of childhood is reflected from the length of age differentiation. Traditionally in India, childhood was considered to be from birth to six years of age, although globally it was between birth and eight years. Evidently, global Early childhood development (ECD)/Early childhood care and education (ECCE) policies have majorly covered 0-8 years to create a continuum between pre-school and the first years of primary school. Also, the policies have defined ECCE holistically and include children's health, development and well-being (UNESCO et al., 2012). Prior to provisioning of ECCE under Ministry of Education as envisaged in NEP 2020 in India, children under the age of six fell under the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), while children aged six to fourteen were part of the formal education system, under the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) now called the Ministry of Education (MoE). MHRD was responsible for planning of educational policy above the age of 6 and not below that. In the past, this division of multi-sectoral division had adverse effects on provisions of early childhood education since the two ministries could not distinguish the roles and responsibilities whereas MWCD was primarily responsible for the policies and provisions for young children and their development. As a result, National Education Policy's (2020) approach to bring in radar the birth to 8 year's age, is a landmark achievement. This is evident in the systemic reforms of the NEP 2020, which proposes the 5+3+3+4 structure. Consequent of this arrangement, policy, planning and implementation pertaining to early childhood years will be more cohesive and progressive since these will not oscillate under different ministries. The multi-sectoral engagement now will be much smoother and developmentally appropriate, in spite of the fact that there will be a multi-sectoral engagement here as well. The arrangement will contribute to the holistic development of the children since the age-groups won't be compartmentalized.

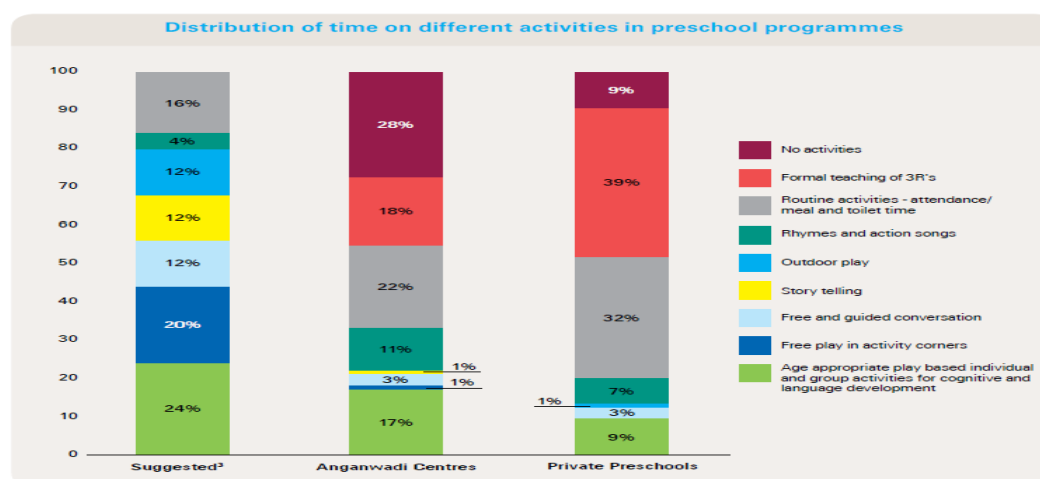
Focus on holistic development: The ambiguities

Early Childhood Care and Education received its due place in the National Policy on Education 1986 as well, where a special section was dedicated to defining it and outlining its significance in India. As part of NPE 1986, ECCE was introduced as a concept of integrated care and education for children ages 0 to 6 years. It utilized the lifecycle approach to Early Childhood Development i.e. caring for mothers from pre-natal period to post-natal period and vulnerable six years of a child's life (Nair and Mehta, 2009). This concept also has adequate policy endorsement. It emphasized the joyful nature of ECCE and discouraged formal teaching of the 3Rs (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic). Since then there has been a lot of work done by Government bodies and NGOs to establish ECCE as an avenue for young children to learn and develop.

However, NEP 2020 specifically states that "the overall objective of ECCE is to achieve optimal outcomes in the domains of physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural, artistic, and language and literacy development." (NEP:1.2, p 7) will be the prime objective of ECCE. Although the emphasis seems to be on children's holistic development, an exclusive chapter devoted to Foundational Literacy and Numeracy skills could be considered alarming. The policy document further states, "the highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025" (NEP: p 8).



The author understands that with too much emphasis placed on school readiness and literacy and numeracy skills, the document tends to undermine holistic development. This may institutionalize formal teaching of 3 Rs as the reality of our ECCE system which is worrisome. As contrary to this understanding, NCF 2005, National ECCE Policy 2013 stressed exclusion of formal teaching of 3Rs and more weight on integrated/holistic development in early years through play-based pedagogy. The India Early Childhood Education Impact Study (2015) also discusses the current status of ECCE centers in our country. Graph 2 indicates the time spent on different kinds of activities within early childhood centers.



Instead of a problem-fixing approach, India needs a long-term and sustainable approach to improve literacy and numeracy right from the beginning in a meaningful and integrated manner. This will reduce the learning crisis if early year teachers are trained in emergent literacy and numeracy development through play-based pedagogies. There is also a need to shift the focus of our teacher education programs from teacher-centered to learner-centered.

Curricular and pedagogical frameworks

The policy asserts to bring curricular reforms by introducing two sub-frameworks to be developed by NCERT-- one for children 0-3 years of age and another one for children between 3-8 years. There is also a mention of integrating rich local traditions of India in the ECCE curriculum in the form of stories, poems, games, songs, etc. This seems a promising development in the ECCE sector in India. Despite these promising developments, there are certain lacunae.

Firstly, in 2018, World Health Organization launched the 'Nurturing care framework' to help countries design and implement the best start for a child's life by investing holistically in early childhood development. The framework details out five components of nurturing care i.e. (1) *good health*, (2) *adequate nutrition*, (3) *responsive caregiving*, (4) *security and safety* and (5) *opportunities for early learning*. This framework is well adopted by all the signatories of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) for programme planning of children from birth to three years. Indian policies for young children already include these components much before the launch of nurturing care framework. For instance, the Rajiv Gandhi Crèche Scheme or the much acclaimed Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) considers providing holistic care and development to young children. However, NEP 2020 doesn't mention any of these policies, frameworks or schemes. Thus the confusion is that, it seems everything will be done afresh. Similarly, there is no reference to the National Early childhood framework 2013 which itself was in sync with nurturing care framework.



Secondly, the policy also mentions developing 21st-century skills from the early years as it is the need of the hour. 21st-century skills are important for everyone but it isn't clear which skills will be focused on building and how. There is a need to define and contextualize 21st-century skills for the young children. For example, the policy mentions developing communication skills. The authors believe that it must also emphasize critical thinking, creativity, compassion, collaboration, courage and curiosity in addition to communication as mentioned in earlier policy documents like NCF 2005.

Thirdly, the policy gave space to the holistic nature of the curriculum however it does not mention the terms 'developmentally appropriate Practices' (DAP) or 'contextually appropriateness' of the curriculum in the document. However, these are the commonly used term/concept in ECCE curriculum documents globally.

Fourthly, the provision seems to be emphasizing school readiness and thus preparatory programs like Balvatika are proposed. Authors feel that policy should have explicitly mentioned the ECCE curriculum as a continuous and upward extension of early childhood development instead of traditionally followed downward filtration of primary education yet again.

Fifthly, the policy further talks about instilling Indian values and Indian ethos. However, it does not clarify how the term 'Indian' is defined in its multicultural and plural society. It is a matter of concern in a plural society such as India, how diversity within early childhood curriculum and classroom can be addressed through nationalized curriculum and frameworks. The colonial curriculum was replaced by NCF 2005 and it took decades to comprehend present realities in critical ways in the curriculum. Now, this policy seems to be proposing value-laden nationalized curriculum and a mainstream one may be. We have to acknowledge current disciplines and knowledge, and bridge contemporary and indigenous knowledge systems. This again needs to be addressed at different levels i.e. policy, curriculum and teacher training.

Lack of Teacher Education Curriculum for ECCE and Teacher training

There was a long-held belief that nursery and pre-primary teachers do not need special training since they only teach basics (alphabets, numbers, etc.). However, this was challenged by many committees and reports, such as, Programme of Action(POA) 1992, NCTE draft approach paper, 2004; National ECCE policy 2013. The policy documents recommended that ECCE courses at certificate, diploma and postgraduate diploma levels should prepare a cadre of trained professionals for different roles in ECCE. Such types of courses, however, prepare only nursery teachers on the ground level. The authors feel that the these courses aims to develop understanding of teachers about child development and play, however, emphasis is still laid on 'preparing teachers to prepare children for primary schools'. To train teachers and teacher educators with specialization, it is imperative that teacher education programmes be regularized and recognized so that quality teacher-education program for early childhood field is assured. Broadening programme components like these will also challenge the perception that ECCE is much more than teaching literacy and numeracy to young children. In addition, there are no minimum guidelines for the ECCE teacher education curriculum, as institutions have adopted curricula based on their own philosophy or viewpoint. These institutions are mostly intrigued by western conceptions and frameworks of teacher education, so they adopt them without contextualizing or tailoring them. In last few decades, Western countries are emphasizing social competence, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence in teacher education programmes for ECCE (Stemler et al. 2005; Gupta, 2015). However, in India, we still continue to focus on teaching mechanical foundational literacy and numeracy skills to ECCE teachers and less space is given to developmentally appropriate practices in the



curriculum. Thus, we need to broaden the scope of ECCE teacher education programs and focus more on training to support children's overall development.

The NEP 2020 mentions the need for ECCE professionals to be trained in a gradually progressive and staged manner. The onus to prepare training manuals and frameworks lies with NCERT at the National level. Consequently, it is believed that, the levels of ECCE teacher training and education will be streamlined and improve qualitatively. The policy also recognized the need for training Anganwadi workers (AWWs) on foundational literacy and numeracy skills as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme had focused more on health and nutrition, and the ECCE and learning part was compromised (State of the young child report, 2020). However, there is greater issue as to, how will the training for Anganwadi workers and Preschool teachers be equalized in terms of logic. This is because, there is a huge gap in terms of the socio-economic status of AWW and the teachers in our society. Therefore, the authors believe that the training should be carefully planned so that this gap should be minimized. Additionally, for the pre-service training of teachers, there are such private institutions available, however, for in-service training, there is still much to be done. Further, Anganwadi workers are only provided with informal training, so this area needs to be overhauled and reinvested in. It is anticipated that the proliferation of private institutions might result if teacher education for ECCE is not planned and executed carefully at all levels.

Co-location and Convergence

The policy document also mentions the co-location and convergence of Anganwadis and pre-primary schools with primary schools. This is a necessary to bring continuity and improve quality of ECCE in India. Despite this, policy does not outline much about the operational aspects of convergence. With ECCE falling under MWCD and now with MOE, the bigger question arises as to how will this multi-sectoral arrangement work? As Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) and Department of Education (DOE) will manage and coordinate a great deal of work for ECCE, if roles and responsibilities are unclear, this might result in confusion and ambiguity. Convergence took place in a few states such as Assam, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, but it was both a success and a failure. Convergence, for example, made it possible to offer ECCE in a continuous manner, sharing resources between ECCE centers and primary schools, and thus ensuring a smooth transition. However, such convergence and sharing of resources presented a few challenges as well. Most of the available resources did not suit the need and age of young children.

Furthermore, in primary school, there already exists a hierarchy among teachers of different grades, and convergence of Anganwadis may lead to more problems. It is significant to note that primary school teachers, management, and even principals may not have a clear orientation towards ECCE. And this may result in structural problems. In school education, there is a social hierarchy and thus ECCE teachers are looked down upon, and this arrangement might fuel the issue further without the proper orientation of all stakeholders towards the significance of ECCE for the whole school and the society.

Further, schools-both public and private do not offer holistic services like health & nutrition. The ICDS, on the other hand, focuses on health and nutrition issues for children, mothers, and adolescent girls through Anganwadi centers. This service may also be affected by the undefined convergence. Also, the private schools are not bound by any provisions of health and nutrition, thus this massive convergence will be the responsibility of government schools alone, causing more confusion and less access.



Concluding remarks:

The author suggests that the curriculum planners must keep in mind the ground realities while framing the curriculum. The points discussed above will help realize the vision of NEP 2020 towards ECCE. The policy is path-breaking at many levels, but requires clarification in many other areas before it can be implemented properly. Like the training of Anganwadi workers and pre-primary teachers need to be at par so that same quality of ECCE is provided to all children irrespective of socio-economic background. Government could plan integrated training for both Anganwadi workers and pre-primary teachers so as to remove the hierarchy between the two.

NEP 2020 lays emphasis on development of 21st century skills among learners however for ECCE there needs to be a careful adoption 21st century skills. Furthermore, cultural specific pedagogy must be considered as a significant aspect of pedagogic practices since it will help realize the goal of inclusive nature of class as envisaged by NEP 2020. The authors feel that in order to streamline quality ECCE programs a great deal of work needs to be done at the teacher education level for ECCE along with recognition and accreditation councils for ECCE centres. The confusion arising out of the policy must be taken into consideration so that the implementation of the policy remains free from ambiguities.



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