

Exploring Early Childhood Care and Education in the Context of India's National Education Policy-2020

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ABSTRACT

The entire education system has evolved and transformed to meet societal demands. Transitions across the educational system are essential and natural because development is always accompanied by a willingness to adapt. The paper highlights the emerging patterns required to revamp the educational system and cope with contemporary issues. Children can acquire an assortment of abilities and attributes through education. As Krishnamurti so eloquently stated, Education never ends with the reading of a book, clearing an exam, and then calling it quits. Instead, learning is a lifelong endeavor beginning from birth and continuing till death. The most significant educational policy of the twenty-first century is the National Education Policy 2020. Its main objective is to nurture individuals with strong ethical principles, as well as rational thinking and behavior, determination, resilience, empathy, compassion, and intellectual curiosity. The NEP's determination to promote Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which gradually gained recognition in national policy discussions, is remarkable. The recognition emphasizes how crucial it is to guarantee a successful education and achievement, which starts from the initial years of a child's schooling. The objectives of the present article are to examine Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and its alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 framework, address the challenges involved in implementing ECCE under NEP 2020, and provide suggestions for increasing the standard of ECCE within the NEP 2020 framework. The analysis of secondary data from reputable sources is the study's source of support.

Keywords: ECCE, NEP 2020, India, Challenges, Suggestions

An individual's first 6 years of existence constitute the foundation for their growth and development because they go by swiftly compared to other stages in their lives. Global brain research findings emphasize the critical role of the early years in determining how one's brain develops. A child's overall development and educational path are greatly strengthened by Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which is indispensable in fostering a nurturing and stimulating environment over these formative stages of continuous learning. It might not be desirable for children to receive education in a formal educational setting within the first two and a half to three years; rather, parents' responsibilities as carers are crucial in

creating a stimulating educational setting for their kids (Early Childhood Care and Education (ECC(E) - UNESCO Digital Library, n.d.). The current National Education Policy of India was unveiled by the Ministry of Education in July 2020, commencing formal education with the adoption of ECCE at age 3. The new education policy highlights the importance of guaranteeing universal accessibility to top-notch early childhood growth, assistance, and education, having an aim of achieving this objective

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as quickly as possible, and not later than 2030 (Nep 2020 Pdf - Google Search, n.d.).

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Since the National Policy on Education (NPE) did not come into effect until 1986, the conception of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is relatively recent in India. A significant landmark was the 2002 amendment to Article 45 of the Indian Constitution, which stated that 'The state shall strive to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they reach the age of six years' (Government of India, 2007). Preschool, also known as Early Childhood Care and Education, is an umbrella term that refers to a broad range of initiatives aimed at promoting children's early physical, mental, and social growth before they enter primary school. It includes programs for infants and toddlers up to about 7 or 8 years old. This foundational stage lays the building blocks for primary education to ensure a sturdy base for holistic development. By providing a supportive and stimulating atmosphere during these key stages of lifelong learning, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) serves to determine a child's long-term growth and learning. It highlights the importance of offering young children possibilities and experiences that stimulate their overall development. Learning is identically important as good health and diet. Childhood education should be driven primarily by the child's experiences and interests rather than by a rigid structure. Early Childhood Care and Education include activities like playing, singing, painting, and the utilization of local assets along with chances for conversation, attentiveness, self-expression, and casual interaction.

It is acknowledged that enhancing and broadening early childhood care and education (ECCE) is essential for building a solid basis for lifelong learning, with an emphasis on the most on the verge and underprivileged children. High-quality ECCE promotes children as well as society in multiple ways, with children from impoverished backgrounds experiencing the greatest benefits. According to the universally approved Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ECCE is regarded as a fundamental privilege for young children. The remarks stated above, which underline the worth of early childhood care and elementary schooling,

are in accordance with international viewpoints put forward in documents like the "Learning begins at birth" philosophy. Depending on what is considered appropriate, these services can be stipulated via a variety of strategies incorporating communities, families, or institutional programs (reference: Article 5 of the World Declaration on EFA, Jomtien, 1990). Children's overall well-being, development, growth, and learning abilities are positively impacted by good-quality early childhood care and education, either delivered in home environments or through organized programs. These initiatives need to employ a holistic approach, covering all of a child's needs, including those related to their physical and mental health, diet and cleanliness, cognitive growth, and psychosocial growth (Reference: Paragraph 30, Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). A continuum of care, health, education, food intake, and protection of children from birth to eight years old are covered in the enactment of a holistic viewpoint on early childhood care and education (ECCE). ECCE is recognized as an essential privilege and an essential bedrock for lifelong learning. Its numerous proven advantages incorporate better nutrition and health, elevated effectiveness in education and gender equality, greater employability and livelihood, and a higher standard of life (reference paragraph 2 of the Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation: Harnessing the Wealth of Nations, 2010). Additionally, it is emphasized that young children have a right to all of the liberties and protections guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and that the early years are crucial for ensuring that these rights are realized (Reference: General Comments 7: Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005).

Early Childhood Care and Education and National Education Policy 2020

The National Education Policy strives to create an educational system that is strongly entrenched in Indian culture to turn India into an emerging knowledge superpower. This framework aspires to substantially advance an egalitarian and sustainable knowledge-based society. The 10+2 structure doesn't currently incorporate children between the ages of 3-6 because formal education generally begins at the age of 6. The new educational framework,

known as 5+3+3+4, includes an efficient Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) foundation that commences at the age of three. The purpose of this adaptation is to improve children's holistic learning, growth, and well-being.

Since more than 85% of the development of a child's brain begins prior to the age of six, it is extremely important that children under the age of six are given an appropriate level of care and stimulation for their developing brains. This will promote healthy brain development. Many young children are lacking in an opportunity for high-quality early childhood education, particularly those who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. It can be accomplished to provide all young children with such essential accessibility with major investments in early childhood education, promoting their active involvement and growth throughout their lives in the educational system. To ensure that all children have the opportunity for good-quality early childhood development, assistance, and education, the objective is for all students to be prepared for schooling upon their start of grade 1, to achieve this milestone as soon as feasible but no later than 2030.

An adaptable and diversified approach, including play-based and inquiry-based tasks, should ideally be a component of ECCE. It encompasses a wide range of subject matter, namely the alphabet, languages, numbers, counting, colors, and figures. It additionally promotes both indoor and outdoor activities, puzzles, rational thinking, and problem-solving. It also incorporates theatre, puppetry, music, movements, and arts and crafts. It also emphasizes developing social abilities, empathy, good manners, integrity, individual and public order, collaborative behavior, and togetherness. The main objective of ECCE is to obtain the highest possible outcomes in a number of critical areas, covering interactions, initial language competencies, reading, and numerical skills, as well as physical and motor growth, growth in cognition, socio-emotional, ethically, cultural and artistically enriching them.

NCERT designed the National Curriculum and Educational Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCFECCE), which has been separated into two distinct parts to accommodate children up to the age of eight. It follows accepted

norms, takes into account the most recent findings in early childhood education, & combines both domestic and foreign standards of practice. It is noteworthy that this framework smoothly incorporates India's extensive, centuries-old cultural traditions into ECCE. Those traditions comprise the arts, narrative storytelling, poetry, games, music, and a lot more, several which have endured over generations. Both parents and others who deliver early childhood care and education can benefit from this comprehensive approach.

The main objective is to eventually attain equitable accessibility to excellent ECCE. Communities and areas with severe socioeconomic disadvantages will get supplementary attention and prominence. Early Childhood Care and Education will be stipulated through a greatly broadened and consolidated network of early childhood educational institutions, which will consist of; *Independent crèches, self-employed Anganwadis, merged Anganwadis in primary schools, kindergartens/departments for children aged 5 to 6, and Anganwadis*. All these schools will recruit teachers who have received specialized training in ECCE curricula and instructional strategies.

For the advancement of universal ECCE, Anganwadi centers will have high-quality enhancements in their infrastructure, furnishings, and well-trained workers. Children are going to engage in activities designed to smooth their entry to primary schools at these centers, which will include kindergarten-friendly, well-built amenities. Collaboration between communities of Anganwadis and elementary schools will be encouraged via integration into school clusters.

Every child under the age of five ought to attend a "preparatory class," or "*Balavatika*," before stepping into the first grade, according to the National Education Policy 2020. In these preparatory classes, play-based learning is heavily emphasized, promoting children to develop early literacy and numeracy as well as mental, psychological, and physical skills. Furthermore, the Government of India's National Education Policy 2020's 8-day nutrition program has been broadened to incorporate preparation classes. Additionally, both Anganwadi and preparatory learners have access to the growth tracking and health check-ups provided by the Anganwadi system.

Currently employed Anganwadi workers/teachers will go through systematic training according to the NCERT-established curriculum to make the initial cohort of competent ECCE educators for Anganwadi centers. If you hold a minimum of a 10+2 degree, you can enroll in a six-month ECCE certificate program, while those having a lesser educational background, will complete a one-year degree program that covers the fundamentals of early childhood education. Educators will be able to get ECCE certifications without compromising their current position. These training programs can be conducted through digital platforms such as DTH channels and smartphones. The Cluster Resource Centres of the School Education Department provide ECCE training for Anganwadi teachers/workers, incorporating per-month monitoring. Through career development, mentoring, and vocational training, governments in states are also striving to nurture a cadre of early childhood educators possessing the necessary knowledge and skills. For their preliminary professional training and continuous professional development (CPD), sufficient amenities will be established.

ECCE is gradually being executed into various forms of alternative education, notably *Ashramshalas* prevalent in tribal areas. Following a similar methodology to what was previously described, the integration and implementation of ECCE in *Ashramshalas* and alternative education takes place.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is responsible for developing and administering the ECCE curricula and instructional strategies. This guarantees an identical strategy spanning from early childhood to primary school, efficiently covering the core elements of education. The creation and implementation of the early childhood education curriculum is a joint effort of several government agencies, involving the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD), the Ministry of Health and Family Affairs (HFW), and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. A specialized collaborative working group will be constituted to assist the seamless incorporation of early care and education within the more comprehensive school education system (Nep 2020 Pdf - Google Search, n.d.)

Potential Challenges with ECCE Implementation under NEP 2020

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India encounter certain challenges and constraints within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:

1. Implementing policy: In an extensive and diversified nation like India, ECCE implementation poses substantial obstacles, particularly in assuring equitable implementation and application at both state and regional levels.

2. Curriculum Alignment: Since it may be needed to make significant modifications to the curriculum, instructional strategies, and resources, synchronizing contemporary ECCE programs with the NEP-2020 standards and framework might be complicated. Because of India's distinctive ethnic and geographical scenarios, ECCE programs frequently need to be revised to meet the demands of various communities. The entire process might endure an extended period and can be tough. A standardized curriculum may be difficult to adequately address the different cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic conditions of diverse regions, leading to curriculum alignment difficulty.

3. Training of Teachers: NEP-2020 highlights a strong emphasis on the requirement for qualified ECCE educators. Nevertheless, creating a strong system for ECCE educator certification and training to achieve these objectives can be a challenging task.

4. Equity and Inclusivity: It might be challenging to achieve the policy's objectives of guaranteeing egalitarian access to ECCE, including children from disadvantaged communities and those with impairments. It is challenging for children with disabilities to gain access to early childhood education (ECCE) services since not every ECCE centers have sensory equipment or wheelchair ramps to accommodate them. It is crucial for addressing existing gaps.

5. Infrastructure and Facilities: Giving children a high-quality learning environment in many areas of India can be difficult since the infrastructure and resources are scarce to support ECCE.

6. Monitoring and evaluation: Designing a standardized monitoring and assessment system is complicated due to India's huge and varied

landscape. There isn't enough equipment for standardizing assessments. When there is no standardized method for gauging child development outcomes, evaluating the efficacy of ECCE programs becomes challenging.

7. Parental knowledge: As advocated by NEP-2020, improving parental and carer's knowledge of the intrinsic worth of ECCE necessitates intensive outreach initiatives and community involvement.

8. Coordination: Bureaucratic intricacies and difficulties with cross-departmental communication make things hard for various government agencies and ministries to coordinate effectively. Lack of coordination in ECCE initiatives could arise from incompatible interactions and partnerships between the Ministries of Education and Health and other stakeholders.

9. Sustainable Financing: It might be difficult to maintain financing for ECCE in accordance with the policy's objectives, particularly in regions with scarce resources.

10. Teacher-Student Ratios: Logistically achieving the policy's specified teacher-student ratios, particularly in heavily populated areas might be complicated and difficult.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

With an ambitious objective of ensuring egalitarian access to top-notch schooling for its youngest learners, the National Education Policy-2020 has outlined an inventive vision for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India that is regarded to be the inaugural one of its forms. But this vision wouldn't be devoid of its share of pressing constraints. There is a striking requirement to realign the present curriculum with the NEP's recommendations, guarantee that ECCE teachers receive comprehensive training to endorse inclusivity, develop efficient tracking systems, and address the allocation of resources in a sustainable and strategic way, among other issues. It takes an integrated approach to confronting these challenges head-on. This strategy stipulates the equitable distribution of resources, the implementation of creative teacher deployment strategies, the establishment of public-private partnerships, a bedrock of decisions on sound studies, and the promotion of active involvement of the community.

Several essential actions must be taken for the purpose of achieving a successful Early Childhood Education (ECE) framework within the National Education Policy 2020. To emphasize the vital significance of ECE, a national awareness campaign should be launched. It ought to be targeted at parents, carers, and communities. It is crucial to highlight how crucial ECE will be in determining the destiny of the country. Additionally, ECCE programs ought to devote a high priority to children's well-being, including their security, health, and overall happiness. This is intended to foster an atmosphere of safety and nurturing that is beneficial to the holistic growth of a child. In addition to this, the adoption of parent education programs that include important subjects like childcare procedures, wholesome foods, and the importance of early education enables parents to take an active role in their child's development. By diligently putting these suggestions into practice, India can establish a strong foundation for its most influential individuals, providing them with the resources they require to not only prosper in the fast-paced world of education but also to make a contribution to a more prosperous sustainable future for the nation as a whole. India's progress towards transforming into a more inclusive, affluent, and knowledge-driven society will be greatly influenced by the outcomes of ECCE within the overall framework of NEP-2020.

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