

ACCEPTING EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION AS A CHALLENGE IN JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Abstract

Good quality pre-schooling makes a distinction for our students at large, and students are balanced to profit than ever before. To really lay the groundwork for higher education and profession readiness, the education in pre-school years receive must be reliable with and coupled to early elementary schooling with more focus on developmental needs, and efforts to prepare the future citizen for potential success as vigorous, fruitful, affianced citizen. Recent research suggest that the better way to tackle disparity, poverty and misdemeanour is early childhood education which includes sensitization of parents and community as a whole. Pre-school education helps to develop a firm base for lifelong learning and can play an important role in the development of child. Making sure all children start on an equal footing can also alleviate social discrimination. It is thus vital to endorse continued financial support to maintain the expansion and excellence of pre-school education programmes. This present paper highlights all concerned issues of ECCE and recommendations are also given.

Key words: Access; Sensitization; Dissemination, Responsibility; Finance; Quality; Training; Research;

Introduction

The child is the precious natural resource of the world. In the early years of the 20th century John Dewy stressed the need to educate children for life. With the continuing expansion of the knowledge explosion and the rapid technological advancement we have recognized the importance and scope of proper development of our children. Many children from poor socio-economic and educational background have great promise that is seldom discovered and developed. This constitutes a great waste of human resource around the world. Many creative children live and die without making the significant contribution of which they would have been capable of. We are all well acquainted that the greatest waste of all today is human ability left

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hidden and under-developed. Therefore, if some of our creative minds are crippled and hidden beneath masks of failure, the world's people cannot afford to allow this waste to continue. The education of the young children can change this myth. The preschool years represent a time of growth and development, when skills are acquired which later provide the foundation for all subsequent learning. This is the time when parents and teachers could have greatest impact upon a child and can mould the potential effects of environmental conditions to a child's advantage. There are certain things that we can do at domestic, national or international levels to develop children's potential and help them to grow more.

The paucity of data on early childhood education poses challenges to any study on the status of its services, recent policies, strategies and innovative projects or initiatives. There is a need for:

- (a) Accurate and detailed information base, and
- (b) Research projects that assess the impact of national policies on children's development and learning.

In Jammu & Kashmir State, children of higher income, double earned and better educated parents are more likely to have the advantage of participating in early childhood programmes than children from low socio-economic backgrounds given the fact that most of the programmes are still run by the private profit making sector. The lack of public structures in early childhood education, regional disparities, and the differences in cost and quality between public and private sectors create inequality. This uneven access is worrisome because learning gaps are developing among children in the preschool years. These disparities are likely to show as children enter formal schooling. There is general assumption that achieving universal access to affordable and high quality ECCE services depends mainly on public funding and government investment in early learning. However, now that many governments are resorting to outsourcing and privatization, the challenge is how we can achieve this goal. One possible way to improve access is through some kind of finance mechanism- direct funds, subsidies, tax exemptions, or contributions. Social organizations- NGOs, religious organizations or communities- can play a leading role in financing ECCE services in cash or kind, such as donation of materials, buildings, or equipment. Funding may also be secured through a micro-credit system that trains women and offers them loans to open day care centers particularly in rural areas. The diverse sponsorship for ECCE services requires coordination, non-duplication, and central administration. It is evident that the role of NGOs is expanding, especially in caring for weaker and disadvantaged children. The government is not the only party responsible for public welfare. Society's well-being and social development depends on the collaboration between civil society and government. Therefore, NGOs have a responsibility to promote public-private partnerships (PPP) to support actions for children. In order to improve quality, there is a need for qualified professionals. In

Indian teacher education system, there is no specialized training programme or training ECCE workers, as such the reality that represents itself is the low status, salary and working conditions of teachers. The likelihood that the pervasiveness of these conditions prevails poses a challenge to the high turn-over and retention among workers in this field. There is a need for a unified vision of early childhood education in light of its international definition. The primary age group that is included is 2-5 years, where the emphasis is on literacy and numeracy rather than on the child's holistic development. The challenge is reconciling this with the transition from KGs to early primary grades. Parents need to be more involved in understanding the value of that period and see it for what it is, a time to value and cherish and not make the child ready for school. Furthermore, the media can be instrumental in supporting the advocacy for early childhood.

Nobel laureate *Professor Jim Heckman* in his paper '*Building the Wealth of Nations*' highlighted that there is no other investment which both combines high economic returns and social justice, in terms of leveling life's playing field for those born disadvantaged and, from an educational viewpoint, maximizing their chances of learning at school.

Thus the problems of ECCE can be categorized into six stylized facts:

1. ECCE continues to be relatively neglected in terms of sector (health, education) and development frameworks - including no resolution of which sectorial ministry should be in-charge. According to UNICEF, in only 30 developing countries had ECCE plans.
2. Even when ECCE is included in these frameworks, the policy framework is still relatively weak, and especially with regard to the 2-5 age group.
3. Financing for ECCE is insufficient, and mainly comes from fees paid by those who can afford. There is still little public financing.
4. Those who benefit the least from ECCE programmes are those who could benefit the most for example, a rich child is 25 times more likely than a poor one to participate in an ECCE programme. Everywhere, the under-3s are less likely to participate, as the UNESCO's regional reports clearly indicate.
5. The quality of ECCE is very variable and generally not good for the few poor who are able to participate.
6. Monitoring is inadequate, though there are important developments, such as the inclusion of several indicators in the latest round of UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

UNESCO has founded *Strong Foundations* which recommended four areas for better achievement in ECCE in developing countries, and especially for the poor:

1. Make ECCE an agenda

This area would be covered through the following initiatives in the state:

- Secure essential high level political endorsement
- Establish and revise state and national policy framework for children aged 0-8
- Set specific targets, goals and funding level.

2. Increase funds and target interventions

This area would be covered through the following initiatives in the state:

- Include ECCE in key policy documents like poverty reduction strategy papers and sector plans, welfare plans and commission reports.
- Target ECCE for the weaker disadvantaged and unreached
- Donors to give ECCE more attention, following UNICEF's lead
- Participation of NGO's, Welfare bodies, Wakf Boards, Shrine Boards, Non Profit Organizations and Religious Organizations including Ashrams and Madrasas

3. Up-gradation of workforce

This area would be covered through the following initiatives in the state:

- Quality Assessment
- Training
- Remuneration
- Identifying Quality Standard Criteria

4. Improvement in monitoring

This area would be covered through the following initiatives in the state:

- Especially for the 2-5 age group
- Focus on the key determinants: participation, supervision, achievements and targets.

We are in the second decade of the 21st century and in the area of ECCE still progress has been insufficient; why is this and what should we do? First, the dissemination of ECCE has been weak. Second, even when the broad case has been made, we have not sufficiently addressed the following key issues that stand in the way of broader adoption of ECCE programmes:

Sensitization/Dissemination

Generally, sensitization and dissemination has been weak and, despite the strong scientific and technological case, does not address what appeals to administrators, academicians and common masses in general. It has focused too much on rights and not enough on the area of contributions of ECCE to the holistic development of the child and over all progress of the society, to equity and to saving future expenditure by encouraging learning at school and avoiding future issues of social cohesion. It has not addressed directly the grave reservations that our society has about the relative roles of the state and of the family, especially for very young children up to the age of the 5. It is now an obligation to all the concerned at the official and non-official level to sensitize people about the importance of this period and disseminate the requisite information to every corner of the state.

A new advocacy coalition is needed, combining local, national and international agencies (especially UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank).

Responsibility

There is a continuing lack of clear accountability for early childhood care and education programmes. Every state of the country is confused with shouldering the responsibility of ECCE resting with ministries of health, education and sometimes also social welfare and women. It is not important which ministry or agency is in charge; what is important is that a ministry or agency is clearly in charge and that the others recognize this. We must focus on who is in-charge at the decentralized service delivery level, by ensuring that public policy focus on all service provisions, and by ensuring attention to the 0-5 age group.

Access

The central issue that still needs to address if ECCE is to become more widespread is the access. At present those who would benefit relatively the most from ECCE programmes (the poor and disadvantaged) are those who are least likely to participate, mainly because most of provision is by the private sector and requires huge amount of fee that they cannot afford. In far flung rural areas the facility is not available at all. No provision is made for the weaker and disadvantaged section of the society to make ECCE accessible.

Finance

According to UNESCO's report, spending on ECCE is equivalent to only 0.2% of the education budget in India. Action is needed on both the local and the national fronts. Nationally, more public investment is definitely required. But it must also be more targeted on the poor, to address the access issue and to ensure that spending is focused on those who will benefit the most. Ideology should also play an important

role and financial support should be available to private as well as public providers, so long as the private providers enroll the poor.

Internationally, it is perhaps time to consider a global fund for ECCE. Targeted funds can have their complications in terms of the international aid architecture. There is no doubt that such funds have generated resources that would not otherwise have been available and, also very importantly, raise not only funds but also the profile of the issue.

Quality

It is very clear from looking towards the present status of ECCE in the state that much more is needed in terms of guidelines, regulation and enforcement. But fundamentally the quality issue, like the access issue is a conscience issue – the key determinant of the quality of ECCE, as all the evidence shows, is the quality of the interaction between the children and the adult caregiver. This in turn depends on the training and competence of that caregiver which will be enhanced if he or she is better trained and better paid. Govt. should shoulder this responsibility to establish pre-primary education institutions with proper and attractive facilities. Those Institutions of ECCE run by the private sector should be regularly supervised by the Govt. And regular inspections should be conducted for the same.

Training

In teacher education programme of the state very little coverage is given to the training of teachers of ECCE. Specific training programmes should be conducted for ECCE teachers and care givers to improve the quality of ECCE in the state. For this purpose DIET's (District Institute of Education and Training), SIE (State Institute of Education) and other concerned departments and agencies have a very crucial and vital role to play.

Research

The major areas of research in early childhood care and education are growth and development, conditions of early childhood care and education institutions, curiosity, creativity, teaching learning strategies, effect of early childhood care and education, learning habits, dropouts, curriculum etc., since progress in any field depends upon new knowledge revealed by well-designed researches. The efforts to evaluate researches in the area of early childhood care and education constitute an important contribution. Important areas of the early childhood care and education that have not gained proper attention of the researchers by and large proper developmental, care and educational criterions.

Thus, the education of preschool children in the state of Jammu and Kashmir must have the following considerations related to activities and programmes beyond the infrastructure and other allied facilities:

1. Early childhood care and education programme should be flexible and liberated from teaching because it is not the stage of reading, writing and counting. It is the stage of playing.
2. Preschool teachers need the knowledge of child development.
3. Children learn through play. Give as many experiences to children for play as possible.
4. Children are very curious from their birth. This curiosity motivates the child to ask questions. Generally, parents/ teachers and care givers do not like to answer these questions and threaten them not to ask such questions. Encourage them by answering their questions honestly.
5. Effective programmes should be developed for children with special needs.
6. Every child is primarily an individual and should be treated as such. Don't compare children. Individual differences should be taken care of in terms of their, resistances, spans, needs, aspirations, preferences and orientations.
7. Child learns better through experience. A child's effort should be rewarded.
8. A child is a leader by birth. His leadership abilities should be motivated.
9. Disabled children are not less creative. They should be given equal opportunities for their development.
10. A child's early development has an enormous and decisive influence on his later life. Therefore, early childhood experience should be in a very conducive environment.

Conclusion

Looking through the history of Jammu & Kashmir Early Childhood Care and Education has never been the prime concern area to be focused on. Never was the case for investing in early childhood programmes stronger. The evidence is overwhelming. For this to happen, however, two key actions are needed: increased overall commitment and resolving the implementation issues. The first requires much better advocacy by broad-based coalitions, domestic, national and international. The second also requires that advocacy but also an examination of innovative techniques to be implemented in this area. A focus on these two aspects can also lead to resolving the other issues of ECCE like, sensitization, responsibility, access for the poor and disadvantaged, quality improvement in the existing system linked to the infrastructure enhancement, training and remuneration of ECCE care givers. The area also needs quantitative and qualitative research and its implementation at the grass root level. A broad based collaboration is also needed for the success of the programme in which the role of NGOs, Wakf Boards, Shrine Boards, Darul-Ulooms, Madrasas Ashrams, and

other Religious Organizations is stressed. Public Private Partnership is also needed for the implementation and success of ECCE in the state.

Key policy elements domestically are to focus across sectors, to focus on the private as well as the public providers and to increase and target public spending. Internationally, there is need to build a broader coalition, to consider a dedicated fund for ECCE and to use innovative financing techniques.

Thus, keeping in view the holistic development of the child and the ways and means of its achievement, Early Childhood Care and Education is the scientific thing to do, it is the economic thing to do and it is the right thing to do. Let us renew our efforts in the specific ways for accepting this area as a challenge..!

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