

A FOCUS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION TO ENSURE FULFILMENT OF RIGHT TO EDUCATION-2009

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Abstract

With The Dakar Framework for Action, participants of the World Education Forum committed themselves to the achievement of education for all (EFA) goals and targets for every citizen and for every society. For the purpose, they emphasised on the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and adopted the goal of expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. India is also a signatory to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 and Education for All (EFA) 1990. Thus, India has long realized the importance of both early years and early childhood education and care. ECCE received attention first time in the National Policy for Children (1974), and later the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was initiated in 1975 with the objective of laying the foundation for holistic and integrated development of child and building capabilities of caregivers. A major step forward was taken when The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) which came into effect from April 1, 2010. However, while implementing RTE Act in India, the policy makers left ECCE as an integral component where children below the age of 6 years could also have been benefitted. A strong foundation of elementary education and issues of availability and accessibility of meaningful education can be built only on a strong foundation of ECCE in the country. This paper therefore attempts to highlight the current status of early childhood educational programmes in Delhi.

Keywords: ECCE, quality, provisions

Introduction

1.1 Importance of early years

Early years or early childhood is internationally defined as the period from birth to eight years. It is during these early years of one's life that the foundation for development in later years is laid. Research in brain development has demonstrated that 80% of the synaptic connections are formed in the early years of a child's life. The number and strength of these synaptic connections determines our later learning. Early years are also known as the 'critical period'. Experiences provided to the child during these years have a life-long impact. This can be seen from the fact that children who don't get enough essential nutrients during their early years may develop certain mental or physical abnormalities. Later intervention can reduce but

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not undo the harm done in the critical early years. Interventions at an early age can have long-term benefits and are more cost effective than interventions at a later age (Heckman, 2006)

1.2 Importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during the early years of life: it encompasses education, physical, social and emotional care, intellectual stimulation, health care and nutrition. It also includes the support a family and community need to promote children's healthy development (UNESCO, 2012, pp 4). Participating in an ECCE programme has a number of benefits for children. Research has demonstrated positive impact on children's development who attend ECCE programmes. The positive impact is observed not only in academic gains. Participating in an ECCE programme has social and behavioural benefits as well, as children who attend an ECCE programme tend to exhibit less anti-social and delinquent behaviour. ECCE programme also provide a bridge between the home and formal school. Research has shown that preschool programs help children to succeed in formal school (William, Gormley, Phillips and Gayer, 2008; Kaul, Ramachandran & Upadhy, 1993). ECCE also ensures long-term positive benefits for the entire nation. Research indicates that ECCE can be a powerful instrument for helping to break the cycle of poverty in many countries and an effective way to provide inclusion and social equity to the marginalised and weaker sections of the population. (Arnold, 2004; Miyahara and Meyers, 2008).

1.3 Commitment to Education for All

With The Dakar Framework for Action, participants of the World Education Forum committed themselves to the achievement of education for all (EFA) goals and targets for every citizen and for every society. For the purpose, they emphasised on the importance of ECCE and adopted the goal of expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. India is also a signatory to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 and Education for All (EFA) 1990. The latter has postulated ECCE as the very first goal to be achieved for EFA, since "learning begins at birth" (Draft National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2012). The Indian constitution also includes ECCE as a constitutional provision through the article 45. Thus, India has long realized the importance of both early years and early childhood education and care. ECCE received attention first time in the National Policy for Children in 1974, and later the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was initiated in 1975 with the objective of laying the foundation for holistic and integrated development of child and building capabilities of caregivers. The 11th Five Year Plan has also acknowledged the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Subsequently, the 12th Five Year Plan lays further emphasis on ECCE and elaborates on the concept of 'early learning units', which would be introduced to bring together the pre-primary and early primary grades into an integrated unit. A major step forward was taken when The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) which came into

effect from April 1, 2010. However, while implementing RTE Act in India, the policy makers left ECCE as an integral component where children below the age of 6 years could also have been benefitted. The lapse was debated as it is an acknowledged fact that ECCE is not only a fundamental right but forms a basis for child's overall development and later learning. A strong foundation of elementary education and issues of availability and accessibility of meaningful education can be built only on a strong foundation of ECCE in the country. This strong foundation can be ensured by providing quality ECCE services for our children.

1.4 ECCE in India

There are number of challenges in providing ECCE services for the children in our country.

As per the 2011 census, India has a population of 158 million children between the ages of 0-6 years and programmes and interventions aimed at children aged 0-6 years are provided by the government, the private sector and the NGOs (NCERT, 2006). Integrated Child Development Services or ICDS is the largest ECCE programme in our country. Many other early interventions are provided by the voluntary and private sector. However, according to Early Childhood Care and Education: An Overview (MHRD, 2003) out of the total number of children in the age group of 3-6 years, barely 19.64 % children were covered under ECCE programmes. Moreover, there is a lack of coordination and overlap between government, private and voluntary sector to provide ECCE services to children. The availability and quality of preschool services provided is also a cause for concern. The country has approximately 60 million children in the age group of 3-6 years. The approximate coverage by ICDS for preschool activities is 34 million children. This indicates that more than 60% of the children in our country do not get preschool facilities in India. Children who are able to avail preschool facilities, are not provided quality preschool services. This paper attempts to highlight the current status of early childhood educational programmes in Delhi and elaborates on the quality of provisions provided by them.

2 Method

The research was conducted in Delhi, India and the unit of analysis are the different types of early childhood education programs attended by the children. Five different categories of ECCE programs were selected and are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of ECCE centres selected for the study

Categories of ECCE programmes	Number of Centres
1. ICDS ⁴	10
2. PNS ⁵	10

⁴ ICDS- Integrated Child Development Scheme- 'Anganwadi' centres under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, Ministry of Human Resource Development

⁵ PNS- Private Nursery School- small schools run privately by individuals or private groups, have no recognition/ accreditation, enrol children only for the preschool years or till 5th grade

3. BRS ⁶	10
4. Exp ⁷	4
5. MCD ⁸	10
Total	44 Centres

The quality of these early childhood program was investigated with the help of TECERS, which refers to the version of Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) adapted and contextualised for use in Tamil Nadu, India. Teacher's and principal's interview were also included in data collection procedures.

3. Findings:

The results discuss the profile of these ECCE programmes and elaborate on the quality of provisions provided to the children attending these programmes.

3.1 Profile of the early childhood centres

None of the early childhood program observed in the study was recognized by any regulatory body for early childhood education. Moreover, not many programs catered to children below 3 years as it was observed that 'Private Nursery Schools' and ICDS anganwadis were the only two programmes that had a provision to enroll children below 3 years. This is a very disturbing trend and world over early child care programmes for children below 3 years have been expressed as the need of the hour.

A good indicator observed during the study included the medium of instruction used in these early childhood educational programmes. Medium of instruction was observed to be Hindi in majority of the programs observed, except programs in BRS. In these schools the emphasis was on teaching the child to converse in English, even if the children found it difficult to understand the same.

3.2 Profile of the teacher

In majority of programs, the teachers either had no training or an unrecognized training. In ICDS program, anganwadi workers had no formal ECCE training but only in-service training. This has a detrimental effect on the quality of programmes delivered.

3.3 Provisions at ECCE Centres

By looking at the mean TECERS scores of the five categories of programs (Figure 1), it can be concluded that the best provisions were provided to children under the Exp preschools. The BRS also provided good provisions to the children. However, there was a huge difference between the quality of provisions provided by Exp

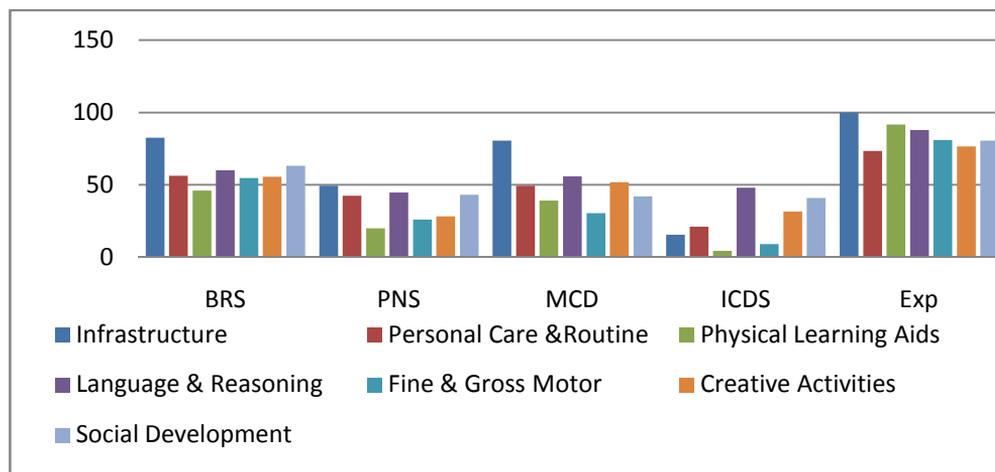
⁶ *BRS- Nurseries attached to 'Big Recognised Schools'* - are schools run by educational organisations, enrol children from nursery to 12th grade and are recognised

⁷ *Exp-Experimental Preschools*- are preschools managed and run on an experimental basis by Child Development or Education departments of different universities

⁸ *MCD- Nursery classes of schools run by Municipal Corporation of Delhi*

preschools and BRS as there was a large difference between their mean TECERS scores. MCD and PNS programs provided average provisions to the children while ICDS program provided poor provisions to the children.

Figure 1. Components of TECERS in ECCE programs



In addition, there was a significant difference observed within the mean scores of the programs under the two categories of BRS and PNS programs. Thus, there was a huge variation in the provisions provided within these two categories of early childhood programs and indicates towards a lack of consensus on the kind of provisions provided to children in these two categories of programs. The other three categories of early childhood programs had no significant variations within the category, implying that all the schools within these three categories provided similar provisions to children.

Findings of the study also report the following:

- All Exp preschools and a majority of the BRS and MCD schools had good score on the *Infrastructure component*. However, infrastructure facilities were poor in the categories of PNS and ICDS programme.
- Exp preschools and BRS schools also provided good *personal care and routine provisions* to children. MCD schools provided average provisions related to this component while ICDS program provided very poor provisions to children related to personal care and routine of the children.
- Programs under the two categories of Exp preschools and BRS also had good provisions for the children related to development of *language and reasoning skills*. The other three categories of MCD, PNS and ICDS programs had average provisions for the development for the language and reasoning skills.
- Exp preschools and BRS also provided good provisions for the development of the children's *social skills*. PNS, MCD schools and ICDS program, all provided average provisions to children for the development of social skills in children.

- Only the programs in the category of Exp preschools had good provisions related to *physical learning aids*. The programs under BRS and MCD schools had average provisions related to this component. Both PNS and ICDS programs provided very poor provisions to children related to physical learning aids. This implies that only a few programs are using physical learning aids appropriately or the conditions of these physical learning aids is not good.
- Only Exp preschools had good provisions for children related to the development of *fine and gross motor abilities*. BRS and MCD schools had average provisions, while PNS and ICDS program had very poor provisions related to this component.
- In the *creative abilities component* also, only Exp preschools provided good provisions to children. BRS, MCD schools and ICDS program provided average provisions while the PNS provided poor provisions to children for the development of creative abilities.

Thus, within the categories of the five early childhood programs, the quality of provisions can be summed up in the following manner:

1. In BRS, provisions provided under the component of ‘Infrastructure’ were the best, while provisions related to physical learning aids and creative activities were very poor.
2. In PNS, very poor provisions were provided to children in almost all the components of the TECERS tool. However, a number of variations were evident in the quality of provisions provided, probably because of lack of an apex body.
3. In MCD schools, good provisions were provided to children under the component of Infrastructure. Provisions related language and reasoning and creative abilities were average, while provisions related to fine motor abilities and physical learning aids were very poor.
4. None of the centre in ICDS program had a TECERS score of more than 40, indicating poor provisions related to all the seven components of the tool. Provisions related to fine motor abilities and physical learning aids were almost neglected in the ICDS program, as the scores were very low on these two components. However, average scores observed on language and reasoning components, as AWW seemed to use language that the children understood.
5. All the components received a very high score in the category of Exp preschools.

4. Conclusion

The present study provides evidence towards the differences in quality of provisions provided to the children enrolled in early childhood programs in the five different categories. Best provisions were observed to be provided by the Exp preschools as they had a ‘developmental approach’ to early childhood education. BRS programs also tend to provide good provisions to the children; however, a large number of the programs in this category had an academic approach to early childhood education, as also the programs under the category of PNS. In addition,

these programs had an academic approach and emphasized the learning of 3 R's in the curriculum. The programs under this category also provided poor provisions to the children. In contrast, curriculum in the MCD schools and ICDS programs were child-oriented. However, the overall quality of the provisions provided to the children under these two categories of early childhood programs was poor. Variations were also observed within the programs of BRS and PNS programs. However, very few variations were observed in the provisions provided in MCD schools, Exp Preschools and ICDS programs. One reason explaining the variations in quality of the program under BRS and PNS programs could be because there is no apex body for these two categories of early childhood programs.

Moreover, it was observed that many early childhood educational programmes were academically oriented and emphasized the learning of 3 R's in their programme. The curriculum was observed to be a downward extension of the primary classes. It included no or very limited child-oriented activities in the curriculum. In addition, many early childhood educational programmes did not consider 'play' as important for the development of the children and thus did not include it in their curriculum. The present study therefore highlights the importance of a regulatory body and the need for early childhood educational programmes to also be included in the ambit of Right to Education 2009. This will help in ensuring that young children in our country avail high quality early childhood programmes, as the quality of early childhood educational programmes determines to a great extent the future learning of the children. Thus, quality early childhood educational programmes will lay a strong foundation for our young learners and help in achieving the nation's goal of providing Free and Compulsory Education as envisaged by the Right To Education Act 2009.

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