



## **EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION - ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND LINKAGES WITH RIGHT TO EDUCATION ACT, 2009**

**Aekta Roy**

Consultant with UNICEF, UNDP & World Bank  
Projects under Women, Child Development and Social Security  
Department Government of Jharkhand

*The first six years are critical years of human life since the rate of development in these years is more rapid than at any other stage of development. Global brain research also informs us about the significance of early years for brain development.*

*Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) makes a positive contribution to children's long term development and learning by facilitating an enabling and stimulating environment in these foundation stages of lifelong learning. Parents as caregivers are critical in providing a stimulating learning environment to the child and the first two and a half to three years need not be in a formal learning environment.*

*Children of disadvantaged and poor families have not benefitted much in terms of learning. Their overall school readiness is very low. So when they are enrolled in Primary schools at the age of six, school's teaching learning processes seem very new and challenging to them to participate and continue. Maximum children dropout of school at this stage itself and miss the opportunity. Free and compulsory education as assured in the Right to Education Act turns out to be a distant goal without doing justice to pre-school learning of good quality for all these children.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning begins at birth. Early childhood programmes result in more agile minds, better school attendance, lower repetition/drop-out rates and stronger academic skills. The activities which foster and promote the all-round balanced development of the child in the age group of 0-6 years in all dimensions - physical, mental, social, emotional and moral have been described as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). In this sense, to promote balanced human development, ECCE is the birthright of every child. With the intention of providing our children a cognitive growth, the Constitution, in Article 45, lays down, as a directive principle that every child up to the age of 14 shall receive free and compulsory education. Articles 39 f, 46 and 47 respectively lend further support to this Constitutional directive. Our Constitution intends to ensure that every child, irrespective of social or economic status of his/her parents, received care and education from birth up to the age of 14 years. This goal however, was to have been achieved 'within a period of ten years from the commencement of Constitution in Article 45. But all along this directive has been interpreted narrowly as applicable only to the education of children from the age of five or six upwards. It is, however, never too late to acknowledge that, since care and education must begin at birth, ECCE is part of the provision originally envisaged under the Constitution for the development of all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.

### **Review of Literature**

Philosophers have speculated about the nature of childhood and the process of socialization. Western thinkers like Rousseau, Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori, have been pioneers in the movement of early childhood education. While Dewey emphasized on the wonderful learning opportunities everyday experiences provided and believed that the child's own instincts, activities, and interests should be the starting point of education, Froebel believed that action and direct observation were the best ways to educate children. Their ideas have opened the way for sensorial and practical activities

forming the curricular content. Their insights into the importance of exploration and play, art, rhythm, rhyme, movement, and active participation of the child led to the inclusion of these elements in classroom dynamics.

Indian thinkers have also been guided by their observations concerning young children and their findings about the child's interest in activities using different materials. Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, Gijubhai Badekha, and Tarabai Modak were the first Indians to conceptualize a child-centred approach to the care and education of young children. They were of the view that education must be imparted in the child's mother tongue and should be connected with the child's social and cultural environment and the community should be actively involved in the learning process. Since language is the true vehicle of self-expression a child can freely express its thought in mother tongue/vernacular language.

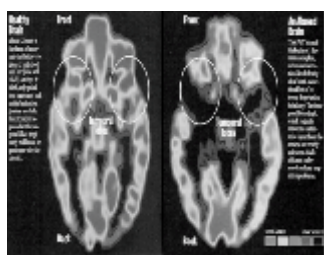
In more recent times, scholars in Developmental Psychology and Child Development like Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Gardner have further emphasised, based on their research, play and activity as the child's natural modes of learning and that children living and learning in multiple social and cultural contexts influence children's learning and development. While Piaget emphasised that children constructed their knowledge by assimilating the experiences and then accommodating within their own understanding and that children are adjusting and using new information constantly to make sense of perceptions and experiences. Vygotsky viewed that children are actively engaged in social and cultural experiences and there is active interaction between children and more experienced others in the process of learning and development. Further Jerome Bruner proposed that children represent information and knowledge in their memory in three different but interrelated modes such as action-based, image based and language/symbol based.

International evidence based upon the lancet findings of 2011 from 73 countries have recognized the significance of responsive care giver - child interaction and opportunities for young children to play and learn along with proper nutritional interventions as the proactive influences which promote child development.

The basic tenets are that learning is an active and interactive process in which children learn through play and through interaction between children and more experienced others. Children are actively engaged in their social and cultural experiences, they constantly adjust and use new information to make sense of perceptions and their experiences. Most importantly ECCE play leads to learning and development in children.

Based on the insights and philosophies of these practitioners and thinkers, early childhood care and education programmes should be based on an understanding of the patterns of development and learning that define the essential nature of childhood.

### **Significance of ECCE in Overall Development**



**Fig : 1**

The first six years of life are critical since the rate of development in these years is more rapid than at any other stage of development. Research in neuro-science confirms the importance of the early years in a child's life particularly since 90% of brain development has already taken place by the time a child is six years of age. Research also indicates that the development of brain is influenced not only by health, nutrition and quality of care but also the quality of psycho-social environment the child is exposed to in these early years. As

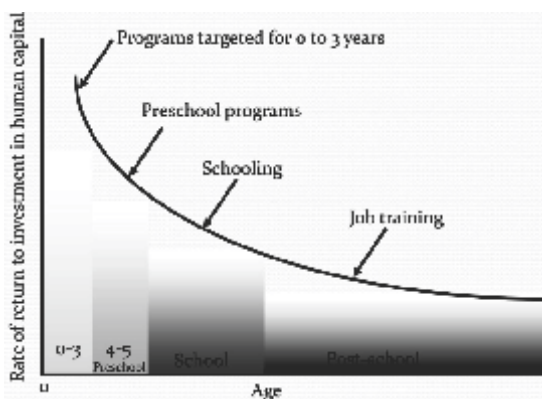
obvious from figure.1, a psycho-socially deficit environment or emotional neglect can lead to negative consequences for a child's development, which may even be irreversible. This places a very large percentage of children from poorer or marginalised families, 'at risk', in terms of their life chances and opportunities. Supportive ECCE services enable to bridge the gap that can lead to more positive long-term outcomes for individuals and society than later interventions.

Scientific research also indicates that within the span of the early childhood years, there are certain 'sensitive periods' or 'critical periods' for development of some cognitive, linguistic, social and psychomotor competencies .

The past 15 years have witnessed worldwide recognition of the importance of investing in the early years of children's lives, with rapid expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services around the world. However, progress in pre-primary coverage has not been experienced equally across regions and within countries, and delivering quality ECCE at scale remains a challenge in many contexts. Positive pressure on countries to expand access and improve quality of ECCE services is likely to increase in the coming years, with a new target in the recent global education framework, Education 2030, focused on expanding equitable and quality provision, including one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education. The ability to recruit, retain, and support qualified personnel for ECCE settings is critical for ensuring that this target is met.

Evidence-based approaches are needed to address these challenges. Yet, limited information is available on ECCE teachers, including their training and professional development, classroom practices, and working conditions in low- and middle-income countries. Existing data tend to focus on easier-to-measure indicators of structural quality, such as class size, child-teacher ratios, teacher education and training, and much less on indicators of process quality, such as the pedagogical approaches used in early childhood settings and the nature of the interactions between children and teachers.

Recognition of the importance of the early years in achieving educational outcomes is reflected in the Education For All, Universal Primary Education, and the guidance provided by General Comment 7 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. These international efforts underscore that early learning begets later learning and improves efficiency throughout the system. As projected in figure. 2 (Source: Heckman, 2007), economic evidence highlights particularly high returns to early



**Fig : 2**

investment in terms of human capital. The figure shows that Rates of Return to Human Capital Investment is higher during the early ages of life.

Advances in evaluation science underscore that quality early learning programs impact both early and later human development in terms of cognitive, health, and social-emotional domains. The benefits are greatest when interventions prioritize support to families and children most at risk.

Equity and efficiency have often been viewed as competing goals-what is fair may not be economically efficient and conversely what is

efficient may not be fair. Figure. 3 (Source: UNICEF,2009) projects the status of the wide gap between the rate of Brain growth in early years as compared to the public spending on during these years.

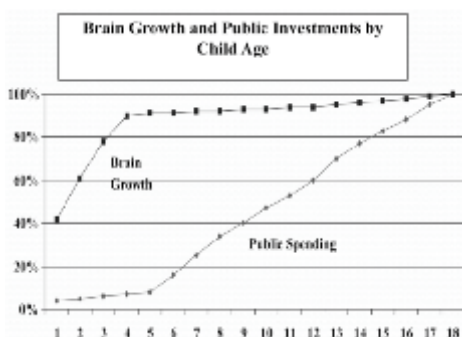


Fig : 3

The evidence is quite clear that inequality in the development of human capabilities produces negative social and economic outcomes that can and should be prevented with investments in early childhood education, particularly targeted toward disadvantaged children and their families. While early education has the potential to prevent educational inequity, evidence is clear that it will do so only if the quality of those services

pays attention to several key elements. Without attention to quality, programs can perpetuate the very inequalities they seek to change.

Although programs are growing and serving greater numbers of children, the promise of equal access to quality programs for the majority of marginalized and vulnerable children remains unfulfilled. In reality only a small percentage of at risk and vulnerable children participate in early learning programs. As concluded in a recent UNESCO review, "While coverage rates are increasing worldwide early childhood services of good quality remain inaccessible to the majority of the world's children." It is evident from Figure.4 (Source: No Wolves Along the Way: towards a national ECD model in Kyrgyzstan, Hugh McLean & Rakhat Orozova, UNICEF, 2009) that the quality of early childhood care and education determines the degree of disparity between the theoretical line of development for advantaged and disadvantaged children.

This is especially true for children in the poorest countries-and for the most disadvantaged among them. The upshot is a perverse outcome for equity: those with the most to gain from Early Care and Education are least likely to participate." (UNESCO 2008). A continuing challenge is to evaluate how far current programs and institutions are delivering on the promise for early education and what can be done to improve those programs for all children.

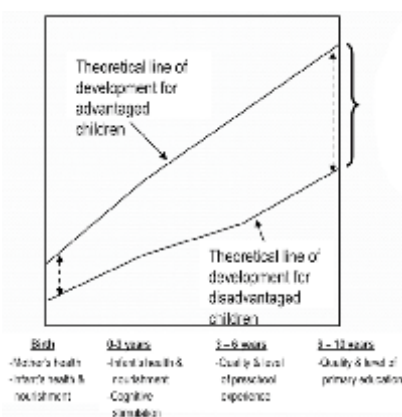


Fig : 4

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) holds immense significance from two other standpoints - universalization of elementary education and equality of opportunity for women.

ECCE is linked both directly and indirectly to universalization of elementary education. Directly, it helps to prepare the young child for school. Further, its child-centered approach and play way and other non-formal methods can help to prepare the school to receive children. Indirectly, yet powerfully ECCE, particularly for infants in the age-group of 0-3 years, can enable girls, engaged in

taking' care of younger siblings, to attend school. Since older girls' involvement in child care is one of the major reasons for their non-attendance, child care services, in close proximity to and co-ordination



with school, offer an effective strategy for the enrolment and retention of girls in primary schools.

### **Current Status of Preschool Education in India -**

Over the course of the 11th plan there has been a quantum jump in preschool enrollment from 21% in 2005 to 47% in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010). More recent ASER data (2010) indicates that 83.6% of three to six years olds in the rural areas are enrolled in some or the other preschool program including in the private schools. This may be attributed to the rapid expansion of the integrated child development services (ICDS) and its Universalization and alongside to the rapidly expanding private provisions even in tribal and rural areas across many states. In addition to this under the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche scheme 22,038 crèches have been sanctioned by the GOI (MWCD-2011). SSA also supports 14,235 ECCE centres in non ICDS areas which cover approximately 4,86,605 children across the country . In addition to this 11,367 ECCE centres covering 92,523 children under the NPEGEL program are running as per June, 2011 report.

### **Status of Early Childhood Care and Education in Jharkhand**

The ICDS program continues to be a crucial intervention at the national and state level due to the central and state government's common commitment to treat and prevent malnutrition and to improve the nutritional and educational status of its children. Jharkhand is one of the eight states selected for intensive implementation under the ICDS-IV project. In the last few years , ICDS has moved forward towards universalization in the state of Jharkhand through its 38,432 Anganwadi centres (AWCs), extending six services to all the beneficiaries (Pregnant women, lactating mothers, 0-3 and 3-6 years children and adolescent girls), regardless of caste, class or socioeconomic status. All these services are rendered to the beneficiaries in convergence with the related departments, i.e. Department of Health and Human Resource Development. The Non-formal Pre-school Education (PSE) component of the ICDS may well be considered the backbone of the ICDS programme in Jharkhand, since all its services essentially converge at the anganwadi .This is also the most joyful play-way daily activity, visibly sustained for three hours a day. It brings and keeps young children at the anganwadi centre - an activity that motivates parents and communities. PSE, as envisaged in the ICDS, focuses on total development of the child, in the age up to six years, mainly from the underprivileged groups. Its programme for the three-to six years old children in the anganwadi is directed towards providing and ensuring a natural, joyful and stimulating environment, with emphasis on necessary inputs for optimal growth and development. The early learning component of the ICDS is a significant input for providing a sound foundation for cumulative lifelong learning and development.

There has been an experience that the pre school attendance is seen to be low in the centers. There are reasons for the low attendances. Firstly, it is the social and economic factors that reduce the attendance and retention of these centers. It is estimated that children below six number about 3.8 million in Jharkhand. Of these, it may be taken into consideration that 25% fall below the poverty line whose very survival and development are threatened by neglect and lack of essential child care services and there are many more above the poverty line whose need for ECCE is only a little less acute. It can also be taken for a realistic consideration that 50 % of this vulnerable segment receives some elements of child care services. But the quality of the child care services still has scope of improvement in terms of quality. Only some of these may receive an integrated package including health care, nutrition and early childhood education, and very few receive day care. While most of those receiving some services fall in the age-group of 3-6 years, it is the children in the age-group of 0-3 years who definitely need more attention, in the context of girls' education and working women's needs. According to

estimates of education, only about 15% of the children in the 3-6 age-groups receive pre-school education. Therefore, the need of the hour is to intensify the ECCE to cover up all AWCs in a phased manner and give a boost to the reforms in education and academics. It is also seen that the Anganwadi Worker is also in additional workload which also hinders the delivery of quality services. Hence, provision of additional manpower for ECCE should also get due recognition. School going adolescent girls if given adequate capacity building can prove out to be effective instructors for the ECE. This way they can benefit economically also through a contribution to this issue with enhanced community involvement and streamlining.

Although due to universalization, the numbers of AWCs have considerably increased in the state, the posts of CDPOs and Lady Supervisors have not been increased to meet the increased demand. As a matter of fact, the vacant posts have also not yet been filled. The coverage of ICDS through the Anganwadi centres has immensely increased in the last few years. Several new anganwadi centres and mini anganwadi centres have been established in the state to ensure adherence to the universalization of ICDS with quality. Huge number of vacancies appears against the posts of CDPOs and Lady Supervisors, which is a big challenge for ensuring quality ECCE programme in the state.

Although programs are growing and serving greater numbers of children, the promise of equal access to quality programs for the majority of marginalized and vulnerable children remains unfulfilled. In reality only a small percentage of at risk and vulnerable children participate in early learning programs. In Jharkhand, Anganwadi centers have been opened in every village. However hitherto focus remains on partial nutrition than on learning. Pre School education, in spite of being one of the most significant service of the AWCs, is not much focused in terms of quality and coverage as compared to the services provided in convergence with Health Department, i.e. immunization and health check up. The reasons for the present status of ECCE in the AWCs of the state may be listed as follows:-

- Services of AWCs focused upon the supplementary Nutrition programme, as the preschool education lacks in budgetary provisions and hence does not add upon to the financial achievements.
- Lack of review mechanism to measure the achievements of preschool education.
- Poor quality programme with diluted or wrongly focused areas.
- Critical community groups still not aware of the significance of the programme.
- Gaps in training, hence in-effective implementation, under utilization of materials.
- Lack of supportive monitoring.
- Minimal community participation.
- Lack of regulation or even supervision leading to unhealthy Competition and confusion.

Hence, in true sense, children in rural areas have not benefitted much in terms of learning. Their overall school readiness is very low. So when they are enrolled in Primary schools at the age of 6, school's teaching learning processes seem very new and challenging to them to participate and continue. Maximum children dropout of school at this stage itself and miss the opportunity. Free and compulsory education as assured in the Right to Education Act turns out to be a distant goal without doing justice to pre-school learning of good quality for all these children.

### **Linkages of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) with Right to Education (RTE)**

The primary aim of Government of India is to provide free and compulsory Education between the ages of 6 to 14 years. It could be achieved by providing enrollment, access, retention and quality Education. Recently ASER (Annual School Education Report) 2014, 10th survey report has revealed that only 20 to 25 percent of 3 R'S have been achieved throughout India. The experts feel that there is some missing link and majority of them admit that the pre schooling system is not properly focused by Govt. of India. The RTE Act, 2009 has also not pronounced any responsibility to Central Government to take steps for the betterment of pre schooling.

ECCE refers to programs and provisions for children from Prenatal to six years of age which cater the needs of a child in all domains of development i.e., Physical, motor, language, cognitive, social, emotional, creative and aesthetic appreciation and ensure synergy with health and nutrition aspects. This would cover developmental priorities for each sub-stage within the continuum i.e., care, early stimulation/interaction needs for children below three years and developmentally appropriate preschool education for 3 to 6 year olds with a more structured and planned school readiness component for 5 to 6 year olds. This policy is thus applicable to all early childhood care and education programs related services in public, private and voluntary sectors in all setting across regions that are offered to children under six years. These services could go by the nomenclature of Anganwadis, Crèches, play groups/schools, preschools, nursery schools, kindergartens, preparatory schools, Balwadi, home based care etc., and purpose to catch the needs of children from prenatal to six years.

The right of children to free and compulsory education act (RTE-2009) which came into effect from 1st April, 2010 has also addressed ECCE under section 11 of the act which states "with a view to prepare children above 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 may make necessary arrangements for providing free preschool education for such children."

Since ECCE is a cross-sectoral programme, addressing the intersecting needs of children, women and girls, ECCE as a component should receive due attention in all dimensions and stages of education, such as women's education, education of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, elementary education, vocational education, content and process, teacher training and higher education.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in India has emphasized on child-friendly child centered teaching learning processes to facilitate holistic development of every child in 6 to 14 year age group. Various attempts are being made in the states to ensure that every factor contributing to children's development is looked into and all related issues are addressed to make it a reality of every child. One major factor that contributes to the development of a child in this direction is the child's pre-school experience. Research has provided ample evidences that performance of children in primary school, school completion, and literacy levels are strongly associated with the quality of their early learning experiences both at home and in preschool programs.

**Preschool Education in the 11th Plan** There have been some significant developments in the course of the 11th plan which have implications for preschool education. In 2006 at the policy level the subject of ECCE in the business allocation rules was shifted in GOI from MHRD to MWCD (Ministry of Woman and Child Development). Subsequently a major landmark in the last few years has been the enactment of RTE act which came into effect from 1st April, 2010.

**Analysis of Issues regarding Implementation of Preschool Education** - While preschool enrollments have increased over the years, issues of quality, equity and capacity continue to be significant. The overriding concern is that a large number of children may be coming into primary schools without attending preschool or attending but not getting adequate preparation for the primary curriculum in terms of school readiness. Hence this situation invites an analysis of what are the issues that have lead to this status of preschool education

**Some Significant Issues are identified as Follows:**

1. Lack of appreciation and awareness at the public sector of the need for age appropriate interventions for children within each sub-stage of early childhood in terms of growing needs and capacities.
2. Inadequate priority to preschool education in ICDS resulting in its perception universally as a nutrition program.
3. Absence of any guidelines, resource materials and standards of quality in preschool education which leads to a minimalist approach in public sector program and a laissez faire situation in private sector provision with developmentally inappropriate practices by way of downward extension of primary education.
4. Lack of institutional capacity in Preschool education.
5. Complete absence of MIS or data base on ECCE.
6. A major factors responsible for the issues persisting are that there has so far been no centrally sponsored scheme and dedicated funding for preschool education.

**Recommendation in the 12 Five Years Plan**

1. A major shift in the 12 five year plan is to extend RTE entitlement downwards to include the preschool stage of education.
2. It is recommended that preschool education for 4 to 6 years old should be brought into the fold of primary education as a school readiness program for children prior to their entering grade one.
3. All the states will be recommended to shift the age of entry to the grade one uniformly at the six years to aligned RTE stipulation.
4. Every primary school will have a pre-primary section for four to six years olds for which adequate resources will be apportioned to be able to provide a sound and developmentally appropriate school readiness program of acceptable quality to children.
5. School readiness refers to certain cognitive and linguistic concepts and skills as well as positive disposition towards learning through play and activity and prepares the child to learn 3Rs more effectively. Later in their primary grades.
6. The concept of early learning unit will be introduced which would bring together the preprimary and early primary grades as integrated units.
7. The NCERT model curriculum for diploma in ECE teacher education already reflects the integrated concepts as it covers teacher preparation for both preschool grade 1 and 2 in its scope.
8. The preschool education component will be included under SSA/RTE as a separate component within a specific budget line

## **CONCLUSION**

As we know ECCE is visualized as an integrated holistic program for children include provisions of education, care, health and nutrition and it has the positive effect of children's retention and attendance. Whatever interventions we are providing for the achievement of quality education, it is imperative to build a strong foundation for the learning. Hence the government of India has to focus and provide aide financially and institutionally to the domain of ECCE for the betterment of quality education through the ECCE in a meaningful and systematic manner.

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