

### ECE and Quality Education for all

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#### Abstract

*The first five to six years of a child's life is very crucial as during this period as about 80 per cent of the brain development takes place. Early childhood education influences intellectual development besides fostering social and emotional development. There is also research evidence that high quality early childhood education has long term positive effect on children's learning and subsequent school success. Early childhood education produces meaningful gains in cognitive, social and emotional development during the preschool years. There is research evidence that the dropout rate among those who receive early childhood education is much lower than those who do not receive. It further facilitates achieving of the goal – elementary education for all.*

*The Early Childhood Education is presently in the hands of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) which run under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The coverage of children for ECCE is very low – 40 per cent. This is because country has presently approximately 60 million children in the age-group 3-6. Of these, approximately 26 million children only are being covered under ICDS. Most of the time, AWCs are undertaking activities geared to nutrition and other small components. As such very limited time is devoted to the education of children. Further the Anganwadi workers have very limited knowledge about child development.*

*Early Childhood Education is predominantly in the hands of private schools which are run by entrepreneurs primarily with profit motive. The access to early childhood education is limited to children belonging to better-off families.*

*The Government has yet to accept the responsibility for quality early childhood education for all. The government should make early child education free and compulsory for all by amending the RTE 2009 suitably.*

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## **Eliminating Poverty – The Challenge**

Millions of people are reeling under poverty in India. It is estimated that of 1.21 billion people, about 40 per cent are living in extremely poverty. They are leading a very miserable life. There is hardly any magic lamp through we can eliminate poverty. The only viable approach to meet the challenge is quality basic education. Quality basic education is the only means of fighting poverty at all stages and in different contexts. It reduces the vulnerability of under-privileged population to poverty by providing them with a set of production and livelihood skills. Education can thus, be a lever to start making a difference in the lives of the poorest of the poor.

### ***Early Childhood Education and Quality Basic Education for All***

Learning begins at birth. The first five to six years of a child's life is very crucial as this period helps an individual for his/her long life development. About 80 per cent of the brain development of an individual takes place in this crucial period. A child is bestowed with innate curiosity. He/she has a strong urge to acquire knowledge of his/her environment. Learning is a natural instinct in young children. Early childhood education influences intellectual development besides fostering social and emotional development. There is also research evidence that high quality early childhood education has long term positive effect on children's learning

and subsequent school success. Early childhood education produces meaningful gains in cognitive, social and emotional development during the preschool years. Further it better prepares children to meet the complex demands of formal schooling. It checks dropout rate at the primary and upper primary level. There is research evidence that the dropout rate among those who receive early childhood education is much lower than those who do not receive. It further facilitates achieving of the goal – elementary education for all.

### **Status of Early Childhood Education**

Article 45 of the Indian Constitution makes provision for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to all children in the age group 0-6. The Article 45 reads as “the State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until the complete the age of six years”. Since Article 45 falls under Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution, it is therefore, not a justifiable right of every child.

The ECCE is provided to children under the Scheme *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)*. The ECCE has two components – early childhood care and early childhood education. The Govt. has opened Anganwadi Centres to provide ECCE to children. These centres provide care for new born babies as well as ensure that all children below the age of 6 are immunized or in other words have received vaccinations. They are

also expected to provide antenatal care for pregnant women and ensuring that they are immunized against tetanus etc. They are also providing necessary supplementary nutrition to children. Besides their duties include inter-alia to provide preschool education/ECE to children who are between 3 to 6 years.

### ***Coverage of Children in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)***

According to Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER, 2011), there were 4,56,994 ICDS Centres in India. Around 25 million children were enrolled in these centres. But only 31 per cent of them attended and participated in these centres on a continuing basis. The coverage of AWCs is very limited. This is because the country has presently approximately 60 million children in the age-group 3-6. Of these, approximately 26 million children are being covered under ICDS. Despite the regular expansion of the ICDS centres, the coverage of children for ECCE is as low as 40 per cent.

The uncovered and unreachd children of ECCE are found in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas, they are located in isolated and remote hamlets, dalit hamlets and settlements. In urban areas, these are in slums in which construction workers, and rural migrants etc. live. In light of this situation, access to early childhood education is limited. Children belonging to disadvantaged sections of society and households of

the poorest of the poor are worst hit in this regard.

### ***Quality of Early Childhood Education***

Most of the time, AWCs are undertaking activities geared to nutrition and other small components. This is because the Anganwari workers are not able to deal with the psycho-social needs of the children. Further the minimum qualification for the position of a Anganwari worker is either 10th or 10+2 standard in most of the states. However, many Anganwari workers are even under-matriculates. Thus they do not possess any certificate or diploma in education. They do not have any grounding in the pedagogy of early childhood education. Therefore, they are not able to address the learning needs of children besides psycho-social needs. They are also not able to prepare them for primary education. In view of the situation, the access and coverage for the early childhood education does not mean much if the system is functioning in this manner.

### ***Early Childhood/Pre-primary Education and Private Schools***

Early childhood education is predominantly in the hands of private schools which are run by entrepreneurs primarily with profit motive. They charge tuition fees and allied charges including donation. Tuition fees charged by them differ from school to school. There is hardly any government control over their

admission policy and quantum of tuition fees. The pattern of the tuition fees etc. is determined by the market forces. Some government primary schools run by Municipal Corporation of Delhi also provide pre-school education/ECE. But the number of such schools is very limited. Most of the un-aided private schools which are known as un-aided public schools are located in urban or semi-urban areas. The number of such schools is very limited in rural/remote/tribal areas. Since the percentage of un-aided public schools is not more than 20 per cent of the total schools, the access to early childhood education is limited to children belonging to better-off families. However, un-aided public schools are increasing access to early childhood education.

### **Government Policy on Early Childhood Education**

The government is yet to accept the responsibility for quality early childhood education for all. Its policy is reflected in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2009. Clause 11 of the RTE, 2009 specifies that “with a view to prepare children above the 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 arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children”.

None of the state governments in India so far owned the responsibility

for providing pre-school education to all the children in age-group 3 to 6. Recently in Delhi, the Department of Education has taken initiative to develop norms for admission of children to pre-school/early childhood education and to regulate tuition fees etc. Such initiatives are more or less conspicuously absent in other states. In view of the situation, early childhood education is not integral part of India’s education system.

The government has not so far developed any comprehensive policy to increase access to ECE and to improve its quality. The government is not earmarking any financial resources to increase access to ECE and to improve its quality.

### **Pre-service and In-service Training of Early Childhood Teachers**

There is paucity of professionally trained early childhood teachers. This is primarily due to the reason that they are very limited number of colleges of education preparing for early childhood teachers. The existing colleges of education preparing for early childhood teachers are in the private sector only.

The Govt. of India has set-up National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) for regulating teacher education programme both at the elementary and secondary level. This body is required to maintain standards in teacher education. It has developed norms regarding infrastructure facilities and teaching workforce. All the colleges of education

need to seek accreditation from the National Body for their different courses in education before admitting students. This body is not mandated to regulate the quality of education being imparted by early childhood colleges of education. Similarly facilities for professional development of early childhood teacher educators are hardly available.

Early childhood teachers and teacher educators are mostly women. However, both men and women constitute supporting staff in early childhood colleges of education.

In the light of above paragraphs, it is evident that early childhood child

education is a must for every child to prepare him/her to meet the complex demands of formal schooling. It also prepares him/her to receive later education. This is highly essential to achieve the goal - quality education for all in India. It is therefore absolutely essential that the Government of India takes-up this responsibility and amend the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2009 to include early child education. This would ensure that each child irrespective of his/her parents social and economic status receives quality elementary education.