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## Emerging Challenges in Early Childhood Education: A Psycho-social Perspective

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The importance of the first six years of a child's life is globally recognised to be the most critical years for life-long development since pace of development in these years is extremely rapid. Studies in neuro sciences have provided convincing evidence of critical periods located within these early years for forming of synaptic connections in brain and for the full development of its potential. Researches have also indicated that if these early years are not supported by, or embedded in, a stimulating and enriching physical and psychological environment, the chances of child's brain developing to its full potential are considerably and often irreversibly reduced. This is also important as a foundation for inculcation of socio-cultural and personal values in children. It is well established that the period of early childhood years lays strong foundation for personality development.

Traditionally, in the past, much of the early care and education of the

child was informal, within the family and largely through the support of elders, be it caring practices or value education. Through stories and traditional games commonly drawn from one generation to the next provided children rich cultural context and heritage. This wealth of developmentally appropriate child care practices is gradually becoming extinct. The child rearing practices have altered since extended families are rarely available to support child care. Given the constant pressures and challenges of day-to-day existence in today's complex society, the possibilities of informal early care and education for the young child at home is becoming less of a reality. It was this changing social context over the years, which laid the seeds for the introduction of the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which has evolved and has grown in present day times.

It is well known that independence ushered in a new era of child development/welfare in India. The last

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65 years(1947-2012)initiatives testify this commitment. The Constitution of India made it obligatory for the State and society, in general, to protect the child's rights to survival, growth and development. Recognising this, Article 15(3) empowered the State to make any special provision in favour of children. Article 39(e) and 39(f) also lay down that the State shall direct its policy in such a manner that the tender age of children is not abused and children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner, and childhood is protected against exploitation and moral and material abandonment. Article 45 further directed the State to provide Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children upto the age of 6 years.

development programmes, enacting legislation and a reaffirmation of global commitments. United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) lead the global Education For All (EFA) movement to meet the learning needs of all children by 2015. Ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, those in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality. The first goal of EFA is to improve and expand quality ECCE, especially for children belonging to disadvantaged sections of society.

It is well known that Early Childhood Care and Education provisions in India are available through three distinct channels,



In order to meet these obligations, concerted measures have been taken at the national level in the field of child development. Needless to mention that the emphasis has been on adoption of relevant pro-child policies, launching of welfare and

i.e., public, private and non-governmental. The public and government-sponsored programmes are largely directed towards the disadvantaged communities. As a sequel to the adoption of the National Policy for Children, Government of

India has initiated the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme.

### **ECE in Public Sector**

So far as governmental efforts are concerned, ICDS is the single largest outreach programme in the country (i.e., 14 lakh AWCs), which caters to ECE requirements of children of socio-economically weaker beneficiary families. Play-way method is adopted for organising various activities for children to facilitate their overall development. These activities include physical and motor, cognitive, aesthetic, social, emotional and language development. In addition, activities are organised for development of moral and cultural values. At the age of 3, when the child enters *Anganwadi* Centre (AWC) for ECE, emphasis is given for the child to have sensory experiences through touch, taste, smelling, hearing and seeing. Under the ICDS programme, ECE is one of the important services. However, it has been found that ECE is one of the weaker components under ICDS. The coverage is less than one-fifth of the target group under the programme. The AWCs have weak infrastructure in terms of adequate space and proper buildings. They also lack suitable pre-school materials.

On the other hand, there is poor monitoring and lack of community ownership. Moreover, problems related to *Anganwadi* Workers (AWWs) also pose threat to ECE service such as inadequate incentives, unrealistic

job charts and mismatch between training and work situations. The AWWs are overburdened with work additionally assigned to them such as work related to National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) other than ICDS health services, unrelated work assigned by district administration of other programmes related to development of women.

It has, however, been observed in some AWCs in the all regions that ICDS functionaries have made some efforts in preparation of toys using locally available no cost/low cost materials. Adequate supply of play materials has been made by the ICDS department and community leaders (Corporators, *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) members, and school teachers) and have supported ECE to some extent. Infrastructures of a few AWCs is found adequate. Due priority has been given to training of AWWs. Parents also lack interest in sending their children to AWCs.

### **ECE in Private Sector**

The private sector is also providing ECE service at par with government and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) sectors. The service in this sector has revealed that a majority of schools are of very poor quality and sometimes of a kind that can have damaging consequences for children. There is a marked tendency among parents to shift their children from government sector schools to private sector schools as soon as it becomes economically possible to do so, and

often at great cost and sacrifice, under the impression that their children will benefit from this new environment. This trend is oblivious not only within communities among communities and across regions.

Some of the current practices in ECE in the private sector are surprising. At one end of the spectrum, some children experience great pressure, being burdened with unrealistic and undesirable expectations. At the other end, there are ECE centres where little action takes place; the same routine is repeated and children are required to sit quietly in one place. Children find this routine monotonous, uninteresting and boring. Pressure and tension is built up at the time of seeking admissions due to interview/test procedures adopted for both parents and children. Most ECE programmes today are merely a downward extension of primary education. The heavy curriculum exposes children to very structured and rote learning at an age when they are not developmentally ready for it. The curriculum offered in such pre-schools is developmentally inappropriate. Children are required to sit in one place and write for long durations. Few cognitive skills are taught and holistic development is ignored.

As many as sixty children are grouped in a classroom, giving them neither the opportunity to move within the classroom nor a chance for social interaction with other

children. The teacher is unable to give individual attention to each student. Such an environment is not conducive to all-round development of children. Children spend most of the time writing, working with workbooks or engaged in number work. Limited activities for art, music, Environmental Studies (EVS), or indoor and outdoor free play find place in the daily routine. There is a lack of awareness and concern about the all-round development of children. Children at this stage are not ready for carrying out heavy home work either at pre-school or home. This robs them of playtime. Lack of suitable equipments and play materials is found to be another problem for conducting activities in the private sector. There is a limited supply of these materials and if available, these are used more for purposes of display than actual play. Teachers in the private sector are untrained and lack knowledge about the methodology of working with young children. Their remuneration is low and varies from school to school.

### **ECE in NGO Sector**

A little is known about efforts made and initiatives taken in the NGO sector since there is no proper survey or estimate of actual number of NGOs engaged in ECE or child care or of the kinds of services that they provide. Although there are some outstanding institutions that have played a pioneering role in the development

of innovative programmes, these are only a handful. Among the rest, some make attempts to follow the pattern of private schools while other offer daycare and *Balwadi*/Crèche services.

As regards the innovative programmes, some of the common factors contributing to the quality of these programmes were: flexibility and responsiveness to local needs; community involvement and supportive linkages; diversified funding and mobilization of community resources; workers' training that was process-oriented leading to both competence and confidence and with strong community support leading to heightened self-esteem; strong leadership along with participation in decision-making and internalization of values and good two-way communication (MSRRF, 1994-95).

### **Issues and Concerns**

- Despite the regular expansion of ICDS programme which is continuing to be the main vehicle for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the coverage of children for ECCE is still quite low. This is an issue of both inadequate access and inadequate quality of service delivery.
- Pre-school education is imparted through nursery, kindergartens, and pre-primary centres which largely caters to urban families. It is estimated that the number of children enrolled in ECE in all

kinds of programmes is around 40 per cent of 3-6 age group population as per the recent estimate. Sixty per cent children are to be enrolled.

- Private pre-schools are oversubscribed and there is competition for seats in these prominent schools.
- The present situation of ECE in the Public, Private and Non-Government sectors has generated the emergence of some major issues and concerns. These are related to curriculum, teachers, teacher-pupil ratio, infrastructure, supervision and monitoring. Curriculum on ECE is to be activities-based, age-specific, and child-centred aiming at all-round development, adapted to context and flexible. There is divide between rural and urban India.
- Motivated and appropriately trained teachers are required to work with young children, which the system lacks at present.
- Teacher-child ratio and group size would help in adult-child interaction varying with the age of children. To maintain 1:25 ratio between teacher-children, we need large number of trained teachers. Supervision and monitoring of ECE should encourage attempt to improve its quality, which is yet to be institutionalized effectively.

The above review on ECE services in different sectors reveals poor quality of ECE programme, particularly

of those in the private sector. It is imperative that the government take up the responsibility of controlling the spread of poor quality ECE programmes through appropriate regulatory processes. Different strategies and approaches will have to be developed to address the issue of quality in the three sectors.

There are quality issues in the government sector mainly related to infrastructure facilities and trained and qualified workers to deal with pre-school children and transact developmentally appropriate curriculum. The restructuring of ICDS

have been done. It is hoped that ECE services in *Anganwadies* will improve in future, as there has been significant increase in the inputs for pre-school education in the restructured ICDS. As far as private sector is concerned, there is need to put in place minimum standard and norms for organising ECE and regulating the sector in terms of infrastructure facilities for children to play indoor, outdoor games, training of teachers as per the prescribed standards of teacher education and organising ECE activities adhering to national guidelines for ECE curriculum.