

Understanding our
civic issues

Early Childhood Care and Education

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BCPT The Bombay Community Public Trust

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Mumbai: Status and Challenges

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the setting up of pre-school institutions in Maharashtra, particularly after the visit of Maria Montessori in the early 1930s. Pioneers like Tarabai Modak and Gijubhai Badheka, who started pre-school centres and also teacher training institutions along the Montessori lines, provided further encouragement to early childhood education. These efforts, though sporadic and undertaken by the voluntary organisations, laid the foundation for the awareness and acceptance of the value and the need for an organised thrust on learning in the early childhood years.

Why Early Childhood Care and Education are important

The first six years of a child's life have been recognised as the most critical ones for optimal development. Since the process of human development is essentially cumulative in nature, investment in programmes for the youngest children in the range of 0-6 years has begun to be accepted as the very foundation for basic education and lifelong learning and development. Over the years, the field of childcare, inspired by research and front-line experiences, has developed into a coherent vision for early childhood care and education.

It is now undisputedly acknowledged that the systematic provision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) helps in the development of children in a variety of ways. These include:

- Improving group socialisation,
- Inculcation of healthy habits,
- Stimulation of creative learning processes, and
- Enhanced scope for overall personality development.

Thus, ECCE must be promoted as holistic input for fostering psycho-social, nutritional, health and educational development of young children. For children belonging to underprivileged groups and for first-generation learners in the society, ECCE is essential for countering the physical, intellectual and emotional deprivation of the child. From the perspective of the community, ECCE is a support for the universalisation of elementary education, and also indirectly influences enrolment and retention of girls in primary schools by providing substitute care facilities for younger siblings. ECCE is also envisaged in the role of a support service for working women.

The pre-school education component of ECCE has demonstrated a positive impact on retention rates and achievement levels in primary grades. However, it is important to note that attendance in pre-schools does not automatically guarantee better academic achievement. 'Quality' aspects, such as a healthy environment, stimulating activities and encouraging, care-giving teachers, are imperative to ensure all-round development in children.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that early childhood represents the best opportunity for breaking the inter-generational cycle of multiple disadvantages-chronic under-nutrition, poor health, gender discrimination and low socio-economic status. Family and community-based holistic interventions in early childhood to

promote and protect good health, nutrition, cognitive and psycho-social development have multiplicative benefits throughout the life cycle.

In India, the National Policy on Education (1986), recognising the crucial importance of early childhood education, recommended strengthening ECCE programmes not only as an essential component of human development but also as a support to universalisation of elementary education and a programme of women's development. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the largest government-managed programme at present in the country, is an inter-sectoral programme which seeks to directly reach out to children from vulnerable and remote areas and give them a head-start by providing an integrated programme of health, nutrition and early childhood education. The package of services includes:

- Supplementary nutrition,
- Immunisation,
- Health checkups,
- Referral services,
- Non-formal pre-school education,
- Nutrition and health education for children below six years and pregnant and nursing mothers.

While most of the coverage under ECCE in Mumbai is carried out through the ICDS scheme, other pre-primary and day-care centres are prevalent with private and not-for-profit initiatives. Also, the Central and state governments have initiated several other schemes mainly to supplement the ICDS provisions in content and coverage. For instance, 'Crèches and Day Care Centres Scheme' was started by the Central Government in 1975 to provide day-care services for children below five years. It caters mainly to children of casual, migrant, agricultural and construction labourers. The programme in the scheme is primarily custodial in nature.

Similarly, 'Early Childhood Education Scheme' and Balwadis under the Central Social Welfare Board were introduced as a distinct strategy to improve the rate of enrolment in primary schools and to reduce the dropout rate. Under this scheme, Central assistance is given to voluntary organisations for running pre-school education centres which cater to children in the 3-5 years age group with a view to exposing children from low-income families to early childhood education. They are generally located either at a municipal school, community space, place of worship or the teacher's home and, ideally, comprise 20-25 children with a reasonably qualified teacher from the neighbourhood.

In addition to these schemes, there are innumerable private, fee-charging nursery schools which cater to the needs of parents living in urban and semi-urban areas. Efforts have to be made to achieve greater convergence of ECCE programmes implemented by various Government Departments as well as voluntary agencies by involving urban local bodies and gram panchayats.

The spread of ECCE facilities, particularly in terms of ICDS centres, and private initiatives, has been phenomenal during the recent years. However, the actual outreach and coverage in respect of early childhood education component, in terms of

quality as well as quantity, have been uneven across different parts of the city and the challenge of extending the ECCE facilities to all children is enormous.

There is also a strong move towards strengthening the linkage between early childhood education programmes and primary education. In this context, many schools are establishing pre-primary units attached to primary schools. In fact, a massive effort of this kind with corporate funding support is going on in the city of Mumbai. Pratham, a Mumbai-based NGO, launched its societal mission of ensuring “every child in school and learning well” in 1994 in the Mumbai slums with initial support from UNICEF and close collaboration with the MCGM, citizens of the slums as well as Mumbai-based corporations. Pratham is now implementing its programme across the country in 27 locations directly affecting the lives of over 200,000 children with support from a wide spectrum of supporters from India, USA and Netherlands.

Several other smaller and equally well-established and reputed projects have been initiated in Mumbai. While there is no readily available listing of all these initiatives, it can be easily claimed that in every part of Mumbai the mushrooming of child-related activity centres is apparent. These function with varying degrees of efficacy. In fact, there is no dearth of such centres in Mumbai. However, barring a few cases, there is much to be desired in terms of the 'quality' programmes. Many such centres have been started with the strong motive of commercial gain rather than commitment to the cause of better education for children.

What parents must look for in an ECCE Centre

New research that has focussed on the need for integrated interventions addressing child survival, growth and development has noted the impact of health and nutrition status, early stimulation on brain development, importance of early socialisation patterns and the quality of the child's immediate environment. These factors critically influence the child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development in later life. Brain development patterns suggest that learning opportunities in the environment have a dramatic and specific effect, not merely influencing the general direction of development, but also affecting how the brain functions.

Addressing 'quality' aspects of ECCE has not yet received the required attention, while the focus continues to remain largely on 'achieving quantitative target figures'. The balance between quality and quantity is more precarious than ever. Indeed, the competing challenges of quantitative outreach vis-à-vis quality dimensions are not easy to overcome but there is urgent and imperative need to appreciate that a balanced approach is crucial.

The centres, which are expected at best to provide necessary maturational and experiential readiness to the child, have been turned into regular sessions for training children in the '3Rs' on the plea that admission to primary schools would otherwise be denied. Thus, what should have been a simple pre-preparatory environment for creating interest and readiness for learning becomes a rigorous pressurising and premature exercise for performance and achievement. Parents need to be aware of the damage created by such pressures on young children.

Many issues and concerns confront parents in the selection of an appropriate ECCE centre for their children. At present, in the absence of the system of licensing or

recognition of ECCE institutions, the emerging concern is of quality assurance in terms of appropriateness of the learning experiences for children and safety of the environment in which such programmes are conducted. Many pre-schools have mushroomed in Mumbai in the guise of 'play schools' for very young children, which do not do justice to the claim of "learning by playing".

Other closely related issues that emerge in the wake of quality of pre-school centres in Mumbai are:

- Appropriate qualifications and training of care-givers and educators,
- Prevention of pressures being imposed on the children for performance and achievement (without consideration for the pace and readiness of individual children),
- Channelling undue parental anxiety and demand for formal learning
- Neutralising/balancing the 'over-emphasis' on reading and writing,
- Checking the over-crowding in the classrooms in gross violation of minimum space requirements per child, etc.

It is vital that all the stakeholders (children, parents, neighbourhood and society at large) in the system and advocates for the well-being of children become aware of the need for adherence to the spirit and letter of ECCE rather than be driven by competition and/or commercialisation. The issues of quality and accountability for the use of public funds and childcare as a public service need to be at the forefront.

Parents and teachers, as stakeholders in the system, need to be aware and conscious of the need to insist on standards of safety at the centres and also for good personnel at these centres. The turnover rate of childcare staff, burnout and emotional distress would be real concerns that parents must be aware of and guard against in the interest of their children.

In Mumbai (and in many of the leading metros of our country) there is a syndrome of the 'overburdened pre-schooler', whose tight schedules of training and tuition leave no room for 'joyful fun/play' (particularly among the better endowed socio-economic sections and families). This emerges from the parents' anxiety to secure admission for their children in 'proper' schools. In many such schools, children are subjected to rigorous 'interviews' before admission. Therefore, there is a generalised felt need to prepare children with the '3R's, despite the professed goals of playful learning in the pre-schools.

In fact, instead of the 'upward extension' of the informal play-way methods into the formal schools, we are faced with an unhealthy "downward extension of formalism" into the pre-schools.

However, it must be noted that at the other end of the continuum of the economic strata, there is a very large group of children who do not even have the luxury of holding a pencil between their fingers and scribbling on paper or even holding a book in their hands. Addressing children at such extremes of the economic divide is not just a concern but also a big challenge.

Future Challenges

In the process of establishing programmes of early childhood care and development, we have the opportunity as well as the obligation to work diligently and creatively toward providing a 'fair start' to children as they move from the womb to the classroom and from the close environment of the family to the larger world. Further, the significance of ECCE for Universalisation of Education (UEE) makes it imperative for ECE to be regarded as the first indispensable step in the educational continuum.

It is therefore vital:

- To assign continued priority to ECCE in the education sector. The priority, translated into stronger action, should be aimed at building resource capacity at all levels of the existing institutional structures to facilitate qualitative improvement of the ECCE functionaries and programmes at the field level, in all sections and sectors of the community.
- To initiate advocacy to ensure developmentally appropriate play-based programmes, coupled with the appropriate climate, for all children.
- To create public awareness and a strong parent lobby with not only consciousness and awareness but also conscience with conviction.
- To regulate and monitor quality of working practices propagated by all ECCE centres through persuasive and legal measures.
- To train all levels of functionaries to provide the resource capacity to enable planning, implementation and monitoring of normative standards.
- To strengthen ECCE-Primary school linkage in both operational and programme terms.
- To encourage micro and need-specific planning that would ensure flexible response to local patterns of women's work, child-care needs and local culture-specific practices.
- To initiate partnerships with NGOs thereby provide resource support for qualitative strengthening of the programmes and encourage for the further development of ECCE.
- To undertake action research to assess the relative long-term impact of ECE on the subsequent development and achievements of children vis-à-vis the goals of UEE.
- To expand and improve ECCE, especially for the most disadvantaged.
- To ensure access for all children especially girl children and those in difficult circumstances and to provide them free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- To ensure that learning needs of all young people are met through equitable opportunity for appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
- To eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education and achieve gender equality.
- To improve all aspects of the quality of education to facilitate recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all-especially readiness for literacy, numeric and essential life skills.

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The facts presented and opinions expressed in this booklet are those of the author alone.

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