



EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

Children see the world with intense curiosity and are ready to emulate things around them. They observe the things they see; listen with passion what they hear and try to interpret what they experience. Early childhood education in India was mainly conducted in Anganwadis. The focus was mainly on the health and nutrition of children. It focused on ensuring that children are provided with nutritious food. The National Policy on Education NPE 2020 intends to make quality pre-primary education accessible to all children across India by 2030. It has given strong recommendation on early childhood care and education as the foundation years in a child's life play a crucial role in his/her future development and success. The new policy recommends a play-based, activity-based learning system. It focuses on arts, crafts, drama, music, puppetry, sports and games. The children should be exposed to various learning experiences through which the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and aesthetic development takes place. An action plan has to be chalked out taking care of the current situation, the needs and demands and the challenges in implementing quality early childhood care and education. It includes ensuring systematic planning for each aspect, bridging the digital divide in India and ensuring adequate resources for providing infrastructure and training.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, Anganwadis, Early Childhood Care And Education*

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Introduction

Children see the world with intense curiosity and are ready to emulate things around them. Children carefully observe the things they see; listen with passion what they hear and try to interpret what they experience. The early years pave the foundation for the overall development of the child. Every experience the child receives is a learning. Children learn basic skills in the early years. But along with that, they start developing social skills. Their bonding with parents and teachers are developed in this stage. As Alvarado has rightly said, "Early childhood education is a time when children learn critical, social and emotional skills and a partnership is formed between the child, their parents and the teacher." United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) says, "Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional,



cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.”

Many private educational institutions are offering early childhood education focusing on the physical, mental, emotional and aesthetic development of the child. There are plenty of opportunities for children to play with various types of educational toys, learn various activities like drawing, craft, cooking, painting, building items etc. But these facilities are affordable only to a few children as the vast majority of our population cannot afford the humongous fees these institutions charge. By introducing a social reconstruction of the early childhood care and education, we are not only focusing on improving the quality of education but also preparing the child to be physically, mentally and emotionally fit and active.

ECCE Education in India

Early childhood education in India was mainly conducted in Anganwadis. The focus was mainly on the health and nutrition of children. It focused on ensuring that children are provided with nutritious food. Play-way methods were adopted. Learning was mainly through songs, games and stories. It focused on physical and mental development of the child. But the holistic development of the child was not given utmost importance. The private nursery schools focused on giving children education in the medium of English only. Hence the need for a total revamp in the structure of early childhood education was essential

The National Policy on Education NPE 2020 intends to make quality pre-primary education accessible to all children across India by 2030. This will definitely enhance the quality of education in the school level as children will be possessing basic skills which help them to traverse in a new school era. The NEP says, “ECCE ideally consists of flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning, comprising of alphabets, languages, numbers, counting, colours, shapes, indoor and outdoor play, puzzles and logical thinking, problem-solving, drawing, painting and other visual art, craft, drama and puppetry, music and movement. It also includes a focus on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation. The overall aim of ECCE will be to attain optimal outcomes in the domains of physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication and early language.

Significance of ECCE

According to the NPE 2020, the age group for ECCE is 0—8 years, which is divided into two. The first session 0 -3 years focus on health and nutrition of both the mother and the child. The second session from 3 – 8 years focus on health, self-help skills, readiness to school and activity-based education focusing on play-way methods. As UNESCO has rightly said, ECCE is one of the best investments a country can make to promote Human Resources Development, gender equality and social cohesion and to reduce the costs for later remedial programmes.

The Existing Scenario in ECCE

- Inadequate infrastructure for rendering quality education.



- Lack of appropriate funds to provide resources.
- Neglect of basic skills in foundational literacy and numeracy.
- Anganwadis are focusing on health and nutrition; not on providing quality education.
- Children from economically disadvantaged families are denied quality education.
- The current pre-school education is a downward extension of primary classes.
- Teacher-pupil ratio is not adequate to focus on the development of the child.
- Learning focuses on rote memorization than internalising concepts.
- Teachers are not trained to ensure quality ECCE

Recommendations

NPE 2020 has made the following recommendations to deliver quality ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) programme:

- Provide free Pre-school education for all children until the age of six.
- Target of Early Childhood Education (ECE) for all by 2025.
- NCERT to develop integrated Curricular and pedagogical framework for early childhood education for children up to the age of 8 (incorporating the rich local traditions of India involving art, stories, poetry, songs etc. which will serve as a guide for both parents as well as for early childhood educational institutions)
- Role of parents and community to be integrated.
- ECCE should be included as an integral part of the RTE Act.
- Thrust on significant expansion and strengthening of facilities for early childhood education via four-pronged approach:
 - i) Strengthening and expansion of the Anganwadi system (with high quality infrastructure, play equipment and well trained Anganwadi workers/teachers. Every Anganwadi must have a well-ventilated, well-designed, child-friendly and well-constructed building with an enriched learning environment.)
 - ii) Co-locating Anganwadis with Primary Schools
 - iii) Co-locating Pre-Schools with Primary Schools (supported by health, nutrition and growth monitoring) and
 - iv) Building stand-alone pre-schools in areas where Anganwadis and pre-schools are not available.
- Professionally qualified Teacher Educators for ECCE – In order to ensure quality education, Anganwadi teachers will be given adequate training as per their educational qualifications. These training programmes – certificate programmes as well as diploma programmes will be organised by the Cluster Resource Centres of the School Education Department.
- ECE will also be introduced in Ashramshalas in tribal-dominated areas in a phased manner.
- Instituting a quality regulatory system for ECCE.
- Priority to socio-economically/marginalized districts



The National Policy on Education was framed on the basis of the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964 – 1966). The first National Policy on Education was framed in 1968 which proposed providing equalisation of educational opportunities to all students across India. It also intends to achieve national integral and values through education. In 1986, the National Policy on Education was revised and introduced the uniform pattern of 10+2+3 all over the country. Ensuring a healthy learning environment, providing meals, reorganisation of secondary school education and ensuring free and compulsory education till elementary level etc. were some of the recommendations.

The National Policy on Education 2020 is framed with the purpose of revamping the whole educational scenario focusing on the holistic development of the child. It is proposed to upgrade the quality of education and bring back the glory in the field of education which India was once proud of. It has given strong recommendation on Early childhood care and education as the foundation years in a child's life play a crucial role in his/her future development and success. The new policy recommends a play-based, activity-based learning system. It focuses on arts, crafts, drama, music, puppetry, sports and games. Discovery method of learning is given importance. The children should be exposed to various learning experiences through which the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and aesthetic development takes place.

NPE 2020 also focuses on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork and cooperation. The policy recommends ensuring universal access to high-quality early childhood care and education across the country in a phased manner giving special attention and priority to districts and locations that are particularly socio-economically disadvantaged. NPE 2020 envisions developing future citizens who can contribute towards the sustainable development of the nation. But there are certain grey areas which needs to be addressed on an immediate basis to ensure that the policy can be implemented without any hindrance.

The various areas which need immediate attention are:

- Provision of adequate infrastructure in Anganwadis (Studies have shown that many anganwadis lack potable drinking water, proper toilet facilities and adequate furniture.
- Provision of adequate funds (The budget on education has fallen from 4.14% in 2014-15 to 3.2% in 2020-21. In such a scenario how the recommendation of NEP 2020 to utilise 6% of GDP can be viable?)
- Bringing children from all areas/ sectors to the classrooms (providing adequate facilities, setting up anganwadis in tribal/hilly/forest areas etc. can pose a big challenge)
- Bridging the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged (In the city of Mumbai, hundreds of kids live with their parents outside the railway stations, traffic signals etc. selling flowers, pens, toys and balloons to make a living. They eat, bathe, play and sleep in the pavements. Their families sleep under the flyovers or in the pavements in spite of the torrential rains, scorching heat and the troubling winter. In this context, finding a solution on the question of how to give equal opportunities to all is a crucial one.



- Ensuring the quality of life of Early childhood educators too has to be taken care of. Currently, they lack motivation, appreciation, good payment and professional growth.
- Ensuring quality training to the early educators too is a big challenge. The anganwadi teachers have to be given rigorous training -- pre-service as well as in-service training. Providing provisions for the smooth conduct of six-month diploma courses and ensuring good results will be a Herculean task.
- To train them to meet ECCE standards through six-month diploma courses would itself be a Herculean task. Conditions in many anganwadi centres remain abysmally poor. The provision to provide multidisciplinary study options cannot be implemented in rural schools where the student-teacher ratio is too high. This has to be facilitated with heavy funds and infrastructure coupled with a professionally trained teaching faculty.

The Action Plan

An action plan has to be chalked out taking care of the current situation, the needs and demands and the challenges in implementing quality early childhood care and education. It includes ensuring:

- Systematic planning for each aspect
- Taking one step at a time
- Bridging the digital divide in India
- Resources for providing infrastructure and training.
- Amiable relation between various departments, parents and teachers to ensure a smooth transition from pre-primary classes to schools.
- The education policy has to act as a steppingstone towards reclaiming the pedestal India has lost—as a country with thinkers, philosophers, mathematicians, scientists etc.
- India has come a long way in spreading the net for early childhood centres. Undoubtedly, there is much to be done. We need to expand access to pre-primary opportunities for those who are still outside the net.

Challenges For Teachers

The NPE 2020 has focused on the holistic development of the child. The role of the teacher is highly significant in dealing with children from varied cultures and backgrounds. The teacher has to take care of the following elements.

- Listen to every child patiently.
- Provide unbiased care and focus.
- Deal with individual child, focusing on his/her abilities and providing ample motivation.
- Manage the class as a whole as children have varied interests and moods.
- Explore the child's natural curiosities into effective learning experiences.
- Identifying the interest of the child and preparing lessons in accordance with it.

Undoubtedly, the NEP 2020 is a huge milestone in the field of education. It will definitely help India to upgrade the status which our ancient educational scenario was once proud of. Scholars from various countries enjoyed the pearls of wisdom which were offered by our Universities like Nalanda and Takshasila. The



recommendations are powerful enough to make every child realise his/her potential, explore the different faucets of learning, enjoy the process of growing up and help in developing self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence. Infrastructure, training, funds and no other element should stand in the way of bringing back India to its glorious years of education. We need to expand the access of education to all regions and ensure that each and every child is benefited from it.

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