Abstract

Education begins from the moment child is born and the learning capabilities continue for the rest of their lives. Positive early learning experiences help in the intellectual, social and emotional development of the babies. Children who benefit from early childhood education programs are better prepared for primary school and will reach better education outcomes. Traditional education programs tend to focus on primary education, there is increasing awareness of the importance of nutrition and educational skills in early childhood development. Development agencies and governments are looking closely at how early childhood development can be framed in development goals. At each stages nutrition, care and health support is important along with the educational content. There are few issues related to ECCE like poverty, standardization of curriculum, holistic development, and qualification of teachers and so on. Parent as well as teachers plays an important role to overcome the issues related to ECCE. Parents should evaluate a child’s unique personality before determining which program is best suited for their child. If young children are molded and trained well during pre-school, then there will not be any dropouts in the high school and also have fewer behavioral problems. This article looks at the importance and issues related to ECCE.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education, in a very general sense can be summed up at a basic level as referring to an experience or act that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. In the sense that it is formative means that education is serving to form
something and particularly something that will have a long-lasting effect on the person’s mind and faculties. The most obvious example of this is the ability to understand and use language and mathematics a skill which is then utilized throughout an individual’s life.

Education begins from the moment the child is brought home from the hospital and continues on when the child starts to attend playgroups and kindergartens. The learning capabilities of humans continue for the rest of their lives but not at the intensity that is demonstrated in the preschool years. With this in mind, babies and toddlers need positive early learning experiences to help their intellectual, social and emotional development and this lays the foundation for later school success.

In this regard the Indian Education System has many stages such as the Nursery, the Primary, the Secondary, the Higher Secondary, the Graduation, and the Post-Graduation. The Preprimary or the Nursery has the Lower Kindergarten and the Upper Kindergarten, where the basic reading and writing skills are developed. The Primary school has the children between the ages of six and eleven. It has the organized classes of one to five. The Secondary school children are between the ages of eleven and fifteen and the classes are organized from six to ten. The higher secondary school students are between the ages of sixteen and seventeen and the classes are organized as eleven and twelve. In some states, the classes between six and eight are also referred as the Middle schools and those between eight and ten are referred as the high schools. There are many different streams available after secondary education. The Higher Education in India aims at providing education to specialize in a field and includes many technical schools, colleges, and universities. The schools in India are controlled by various boards such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) board, the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) board, the state government boards, the National Open School and the International schools.

II. EARLY CHILDHOOD

Early childhood is a crucial stage of life in terms of a child’s physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Growth of mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning take place from birth to age six. It is a time when children particularly need high quality personal care and learning experiences.

2.1 EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)

It is gaining importance universally for its role in laying a strong foundation for the holistic development of a young child. It is conceptualized as an integrated provision for children 3 from prenatal stage to 8 years, which addresses a child’s need for care, education, nutrition and health holistically, in consonance with a life cycle approach. These needs may be met through one unified source or program or through different sources, which may each converge on the child, the mother and the child’s physical and social environment, as a comprehensive mode.

Sub stages of ECCE
(a) An Infant-toddler stage for children 3 years and below, who require family or crèche based protective, consistent and responsive care and a stimulating environment, along with adequate nutrition and health inputs;

(b) An Early Childhood Education (ECE) stage, also known as the Preschool/Pre-primary school Education stage for children between 3 to 6 years, who require a centre/school based pre-primary education programme.

(c) Early Primary stage for children between six to eight years. Although children between six to eight years are expected to be in primary school, they continue to be considered in the Early Childhood stage because they have developmental characteristics in common with the younger child.

The smooth transition of these children from preschool to school becomes an area of concern and priority, in view of the significant drop outs in the early primary grades. At each of these sub stages, nutrition, care and health support continue to be important inputs, along with the educational content.

2.2 IMPORTANCE OF ECCE

Most childhood education specialists claim that young children learn best when they're not pushed too hard, they have an opportunity to interact with their peers, and their parents and instructors treat them kindly. Likewise, children learn best when instruction and educational activities are only a small portion of their days. This is especially true of children enrolled in pre-school programs since it's not good for young children to be separated from their parents for extended periods of time. Children usually do not benefit in programs with inexperienced teachers and large classroom sizes.

Children taught at an early age usually benefit in the following ways: improved social skills, less or no need for special education instruction during subsequent school years, better grades, and enhanced attention spans. Likewise, some researchers have concluded that young children enrolled in pre-school programs usually graduate from high school, attend college, have fewer behavioral problems, and do not become involved with crime in their adolescent and young adult years. The research detailing these benefits was completed during the 80's. In addition to benefiting children experiencing normal development, it was also shown that children with learning or other physical disabilities benefit immensely from pre-kindergarten education. Also, children with parents highly involved in their pre-kindergarten education do not experience the same positive results from Head Start programs as children coming from homes where it's not as much an emphasis. Children taught how to speak a second language during their early developmental years are also in a better position to learn English at a young age. Many people do not feel the government should determine whether children should be required to receive formal pre-kindergarten education. One reason for this is children who are educated by their parents during their early developmental years’ experience the same benefits as children enrolled in pre-school programs, especially children receiving a lot of attention from parents. Parents deciding to educate their young children themselves should utilize creative ideas and activities when educating them.
No matter the differences in opinion about formal pre-kindergarten education, children benefit from receiving some type of education during their early developmental years. However, there is not one-size fits all instruction best suited for all children. While some children benefit immensely from pre-school, it may not be the best educational setting for other children. In most cases, children benefit most by receiving educational instruction from their parents. Parents must evaluate a child's unique personality before determining which program is best suited for a child since not all programs benefit children the same way.

III. HOW TO MAKE SURE THAT A CHILD IS IN A GOOD CURRICULUM?
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests looking for these 10 signs to make sure your child is in a good classroom. Children spend most of their time playing and working with materials or other children. They do not wander aimlessly and they are not expected to sit quietly for long periods of time.
2. Children have access to various activities throughout the day. Look for assorted building blocks and other construction materials, props for pretend play, picture books, paints and other art materials, and table toys such as matching games, pegboards, and puzzles. All the children should not necessarily all be doing the same activity at the same time.
3. Teachers work with individual children, small groups, and the whole group at different times during the day. They do not spend all their time with the whole group.
4. The classroom is decorated with children's original artwork, their own writing with invented spelling, and stories dictated by children to teachers.
5. Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences. The natural world of plants and animals and meaningful activities like cooking, taking attendance or serving snack provides the basis for learning activities.
6. Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore. Worksheets are used little, if at all.
7. Children have an opportunity to play outside every day. Outdoor play is never sacrificed for more instructional time.
8. Teachers read books to children individually or in small groups throughout the day, not just at group story time.
9. Curriculum is adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help. Teachers recognize that children's different backgrounds and experiences mean that they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.
10. Children and their parents look forward to school. Parents feel secure about sending their child to the program. Children are happy to attend; they do not cry regularly or complain of feeling sick.

IV. ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
Since the pre-independence era, socialist, communists, educationists and even the government has been continuously working in the education sector for the betterment of
children but still optimum results are not reaped. We do not say progress had not been made but still a new approach for quality education is required in the early childhood education. Some of the primary concerns of the present era are:

i.) Poverty
J. Bank (1997) in his paper “Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies” stated that India is a developing country and despite of diversity, poverty is also a limiting factor which in some cases may hamper the development of a child in his early years. Rather poverty is one aspect of diversity that is gathering more attention as the number of children living in poverty rises. Very little emphasis has been placed on working with students from poverty, even though poverty crosses all racial and ethnic boundaries. But, Pellino (2006) found out that children of poverty are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources as well. Even though teachers might not be able to change someone’s financial circumstances, they can affect student’s success by learning to identify and use the resources that the students do have.

ii.) Wages
In today’s time when everybody is after money the wages in this sector are not satisfactory enough to motivate professionals to enter into this field. Sharon L.K., N. Richard and H. Carol (2002) has also suggested that early care and education staff should earn wages linked to those earned by public elementary school teachers, with salaries varying depending on locale. They recommended that we use the starting salaries for an elementary school teacher with a Bachelor of Arts or science degree as an anchor point. That is, the starting hourly pay for a child care teacher with a Bachelor’s degree should be equal to that of an elementary school teacher with the same levels of training, professionalization and work responsibilities. This is one of the primary reason that male professionals are not keen to enter in this field as in our society they are considered to be the main bread earner and with such low wages it will be difficult for them to meet the required parameters of their family sustainability.

iii.) Teacher’s qualification
Bowman, B., M.S. Donovan and M.S. Burns, eds., and Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council, 2000 recommends that all groups of young children (age 3 and older) should have a teacher with Bachelor’s Degree including Early Childhood Specialization.
It should be seen that Early Childhood teachers have training and professional competence. Teachers with comparable qualifications and experience should receive the same salary and benefits, whether teaching in a public elementary school or in early childhood education. Staff should have a range of formal qualifications, with a portion of center teachers and family child care teachers holding bachelor’s degree and administrators holding advanced degrees. Entry level positions should be maintained so that pre service qualifications do not become a barrier to individuals from low socio economic strata or minority groups seeking to enter the field.

iv.) Curriculum and Transaction Methods Employed for Teacher Education
A rapid review of the curriculum, largely on the basis of the titles of the papers/courses, indicates that the overall trend is to follow a Child Development perspective with, in some cases, an additional academic focus also, which tends to make it developmentally inappropriate. However, in most cases while basic content is in order, some prominent gaps that may be identified are inadequate coverage of (a) the current Indian policy scenario and issues in ECCE and (b) emerging and state of the art global knowledge with particular reference to current research in neuroscience, constructivist approaches in pedagogy, importance of school readiness and emergent literacy, social inclusion and so on. The study also raises a dilemma whether the teacher education curriculum should be prepared centrally by curriculum framers in the interest of uniform standards, despite wide diversities in contexts or alternatively, a curriculum framework should be prescribed centrally with provision for teacher educators to adapt and develop their own curriculum in tune with their respective contexts. While the second alternative is logically more desirable, it would require a systematic programme of professional development of teacher educators in this area as a precondition to enable them to do this effectively.

In terms of methods employed, the study indicates an overall dominance of the lecture method and blackboard teaching in the classrooms as actually observed, although teacher educators and academic heads reported use of more participatory methods. What this perhaps indicates is that the awareness regarding participatory methods may have improved over the years, but this has not yet translated into actual practice in the classrooms. These observations definitely point to the need for teacher educators to move towards more progressive and interactive and adult learning methods of teaching learning. A clear lacuna identified in the study with regard to teacher educators is the complete dearth of resources available to them for professional development across institutions, particularly for procurement of learning materials, deputations for workshops and conferences, exposure visits or membership of professional organizations.

v.) Decreasing Age Range of the child in preschool

Previously, the family system in India was the joint family system, the mothers used to be with the child for most of the time but the times have changed now, the families are not only becoming nuclear but even the mothers are stepping into the jobs. This leaves them with less time to be spent with their children. Today, the parents have found an easy solution to escape from this liability by getting their child enrolled into a preschool at a very young age even when their child’s separation anxiety has not got settled. For their own professional gains they are neglecting their roles as parents. Thus, the age range instead of going upwards it is going downward.

vi.) Parent Involvement

Parent involvement with child’s education has become a major issue in this era of increasing concern about the quality of education. Parent involvement includes several different forms of parental participation in child’s life, education as well as his/her daily tasks. Parent involvement during early childhood period helps the child to form and shape his or her own academic self-concept. Pre-school and pre-school teachers play a vital role in involving the
parents with the child’s curriculum thus; they should be well trained to do so. But it is often found that lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding between teachers and parents results in ineffective parent involvement.

vii.) Multiculturality
Considering our own country India, the land of multiculturality and diversity with so many languages, different attires, cuisines and various codes of conducts. A country that has distinct cultures right from Kashmir to Kanyakumari sometimes creates challenges for the preschool teacher. They have to deal with a number of culturally and linguistically diverse children in a single classroom, thus providing them appropriate education and care and also have to work effectively with their families. Despite numerous efforts in schools, administration, and teacher training still majority of classroom teacher believe that they are not able to meet all the needs of the children and families from diverse backgrounds as stated in the paper “Preparing teachers for Culturally Diverse Schools”, by C.E. Sleeter (2001). Hence measures are required in this field to train the teachers working with such group of students. They should be sensitive enough to bring best out of a child despite of his/her limitations.

viii.) Quality of preschool education
Today’s reality is that even with increased communities to ECE from without the government, quality remains embarrassingly poor. Staff salaries are inadequate and high quality care is not affordable for most parents. As it was stated by Layzer and Collins (2000) that, most states meet or exceed the quality set aside under the child development fund. They fund various small efforts without a coherent strategy to address the underlying causes of poor quality. To address the situation, many in the field are studying what is needed, finding innovative approaches to revenue generation and considering inventive financing schemes (Mitchell, Stoney and Dichter 2001). While inadequate resources are absolutely the first and major problem, they are not the only issue. How the resources are spent is also critical. In spite of maybe important efforts to improve quality, funds have been inadequate and strategies insufficiently comprehensive to make a real difference in the quality of care most children receive. It is as though we keep planting seeds in the same flower bed year after year without fertilizing the soil, and then wonder why the flowers do not thrive.

ix.) Commercialization of the education
Urbanization and industrialization has not even left the educational sector untouched. One can witness this boom with mushrooming of child related centers in every nook and corner of the country. Big brands and companies have now entered the market with the motive of making profits. These companies through their marketing strategies provoke people to take up these ventures but at times these people are not themselves well equipped/ qualified. The once known as “temples of education” are now transformed in to a five star hotels. The intention is to impress the high-flying parents who have the money to afford big fees but have no time for their children. The attractive flashy brochures with quotes by the famous educationists are enough for such parents to get convinced about the kind of education school is showing to impart to their children. This has encouraged some of the schools to go
few steps further and they have hired the brand managers to market their schools. It is interesting to notice that every coming up five start school claims that its aim is to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who will help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. There is a boom of the air-conditioned business houses calling themselves schools with funky names in every nook and corner. All of them talk about the provision of five star facilities. They are spending lavishly on advertising about the facilities and the beautifully architected buildings of brick and mortar. The commercial agents of the education are hardly ever bothered about the effective teaching of values and creating a really good school. They have a clear goal of making money. No one is talking about the life of a school. A good school does not emerge like a pre-packed frozen dinner stuck for few seconds in a microwave. A good school develops from the slow simmering of carefully blended ingredients. One consistent ingredient is the philosophy and culture within the school environment. The environment should be effective enough to formulate the norms, beliefs and values in to modes, standards and rules of operation.

x. Beyond Assembly Line

Given that our society and lifestyle is changing at a startling pace, parents want to provide a relevant foundation to their children’s education. The focus of pedagogies is shifting from dishing out inert clones off an assembly line, to producing thinking and dynamic individuals. Teachers today are recognizing the importance of early childhood development, as well as the complementing aspects of individual growth, peer interaction, self-reliance and learning through exploration rather than through evaluation and assessment. This has become central to the teaching system. Accordingly, schools and preschools across the country are implementing the nuances of these ground-breaking approaches in teaching.

Standardization of curriculum

The focus, hence, is on catering to overall child development rather than academic readiness or cognitive development alone. However, ensuring quality benchmark parameters in preschools undoubtedly aims at upscaling standards through standardisation. Unfortunately, when it comes to local customisation and administering a curriculum tailored to suit the specific learning needs of a child, standardisation of curriculum might come as a challenge. It, however, does not mean focusing on academics alone, but paying equal attention to developing life-skills, offering fun-based exploratory learning activities to the child during his formative years.

xi.) Holistic development

A guideline for preschool standardisation and draft policy 2012 for the National Early Childhood Care and Education is a major push in this direction. The ECCE Policy brings in the role of the Indian Government to ensure comprehensive holistic development for all children till the age of six years and preparing a child for formal schooling. While the policy looks at initiating reforms and measures, the scope of early childhood program goes far beyond basic literacy programs.

xii.) Making Children School-Ready
In addition to overall awareness programs on health, hygiene and nutrition, making the child school-ready is equally important. ECCE looks at building social, behavioral and emotional competencies. Helping to develop a mind that is attentive to appropriate and child-centric Quality care

In India, ECCE initiatives are offered through various public and private centres called Anganwadis, Balwadis, playschools, preschools, day care centres, crèches, kindergartens, and preparatory schools. ECCE, however, has not yet seen much of consistent quality drive in our country, more so, in the absence of steadfast centralized policies and regulatory bodies. The access to ECCE is to be transformed into quality care with optimal hygiene, development, and fun. On one hand, the vast cultural, social, and contextual diversities account for customization and personal care, while on the other, freezing quality benchmarks relies on formulation of standard guidelines, which in itself is a challenge.

IV. CONCLUSION
Given the initiatives that a few of the pioneering private and public players have taken, we have reasons to believe that ECCE is headed for a brighter and better future in our country where it is not just a day care alone but a dire necessity for overall development of children. Of course, certain issues will always remain critical, such as standard audits and compliance with optimal hygiene and infrastructural requirements. While optimal child-teacher ratio should be observed, sensitivity to a child’s need for emotional and social development is also important. Interestingly, if we compare the Indian scenario with the global one, we are far from reaching our goal. Early Childhood Care and Education has seen effervescent trends on an international platform. Organizations such as the OMEP (Organization Mondiale pour educationPréscolaire), which is an international, non-governmental and non-profit-making organization, is working on all aspects of early childhood education and care. It defends and promotes the rights of children to education and care worldwide and supports activities improving accessibility to high quality education and care. Today, India needs initiatives such as OMEP to focus on issues related to Early Childhood Care and Education.

It is important that when considering an early education facility, caregivers and teacher in the facility have knowledge of the cultural supports for the language and literacy learning of the children and families they are serving. They need to have sufficient skills in guiding small groups of children in order to give full attention to individual young children’s language and literacy efforts. They need to be able to draw out shy children while they help very talkative ones begin to listen to others as well as to speak. Caregivers or teachers need to arrange environments that are symbol rich and interesting without being overwhelming to infants and toddlers. Even the simplest exchange becomes a literacy lesson when it includes the warmth of a relationship coupled with words, their concepts, and perhaps a graphic symbol. The curriculum should include more opportunity for individual growth of the student teacher through inclusion of tutorials, individual and team assignments and presentations, and a sizeable component of self-developmentopportunities. Curriculum, or the content of what children learn, is central to supporting and strengthening young
children’s learning and development because it is the “front line” of children’s experiences. Curriculum is different from beliefs about children, pedagogy, learning standards, and children’s skills. Nonetheless, curriculum is central not only to the knowledge and skills children gain, but also to the application of particular pedagogical approaches and to the nature of teacher/caregiver-child interactions. With increasing numbers of children in early care and education programs, coupled with the increasing focus on school readiness, effective curriculum is crucial. Moreover, as the press for accountability increases, children must be exposed to the content for which they and their teachers will be held accountable.

Commercialization is becoming a major concern which if not handled properly could lead to serious consequences. The professionals should be responsible while planning and developing for young children’s education programs. They should be responsive towards child’s diverse needs since it is not possible to develop a quality program without understanding the basic needs of a child. Curriculum, intuitive to perceptions through adherence to life-skills, curious to explore and learn through fun-based exploratory learning activities, and to build a body that works with the correct reflexes in children through activities that develop gross motor skills, ECCE is at the overall grooming of a child.

VI. REFERENCES

[12] https://www.nap.edu/read/9745/chapter/8#236

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