



## **Early Childhood Care and Education and School Education: An Amalgamation in NEP 2020.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The NEP envisages creating synergies in the curriculum across Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to school and the higher education segments. The NEP stresses on creating a national curricular and pedagogical framework, which is competency-based, inclusive, innovative and focuses on comprehensive development of children.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims at transforming the current education scenario with respect to school level education. The Early Childhood Care and Education will be integrated with school education. The major changes will be seen in the structure of Curriculum and pedagogy to be changed to 3 (foundational) + 5 (preparatory) + 3 (middle) + 4 (secondary). This paper analyses the dimensions of NEP 2020 with respect to Early Childhood Care and Education and School education and puts forth various opportunities areas emerging from new policy.

This paper will try to unfold the rationale behind this integration of ECCE with school education and impact of this integration on curriculum and expected changes in learning outcomes. The paper also aims at understanding and reflecting on the role of this integration in building of strong foundational skills right from early Childhood. Suggestions for better implementation of the amalgamation of ECCE with school education to achieve its objectives will be proposed.

**Keywords -NEP, Early Childhood Care and Education, School education, Integration, Foundational skills.**

### **WHAT AND WHY OF ECCE.**

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during period between birth and 8 years of life. It encompasses education, physical, social and emotional care, intellectual stimulation, healthcare and nutrition. This period from birth to eight years is a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. Children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them in this stage of development. Thus, ECCE is more than just 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. ECCE has the possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens.

Quality Early Childhood Care and Education has the power to transform children's lives. It can contribute to greater efficiency in education and healthy systems and a better skilled workforce. Attention to early childhood can also help build more equal and inclusive societies by providing excluded and disadvantaged children with a strong foundation in lifelong learning, and throughout their lives.

In this way ECCE is one of the best investments a country can make to promote human resource development, gender equality and social cohesion, and to reduce the costs for later remedial programmes. For disadvantaged children, ECCE plays an important role in compensating for the disadvantages in the family and combating educational Inequalities. (UNESCO)

UNESCO's approach is reinforced in the Education 2030 agenda and in particular in target 4.2 of Sustainable development Goal 4 which aims to 'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. The inclusion of ECCE in Sustainable development Goal 4 (SDG 4) recognizes the untapped potential of quality Early Childhood Care and Education for individuals and societies. The International Symposium "Early Childhood Care and Education: Cradle for Social Cohesion" (2018) reflects UNESCO's commitment to expand and improve ECCE globally. It builds on the momentum set by the international community for ECCE and increases countries' awareness about the role of quality ECCE in fostering social cohesion.

This central agency of World has been reminding the International community that half of the countries in the world did not have ECCE policies. Progress has been made on pre-school enrolment in many countries but ECCE is still needed to be made central to the Education systems and realize its tremendous social benefits. Early Childhood is the time when promoting gender equality and a culture of peace makes a true difference, as the pace of brain development is at its peak. When children are exposed to values and attitudes that support gender equality and peace at an early age, they are likely to hold them in later stages in life.

"By the time poor children in many countries reach school age, they are at a significant disadvantage in cognitive and social ability" (The World Bank, 2005). This early childhood stage is also important as a foundation for inculcation of social and personal habits and values, which are known to last a lifetime. It follows logically that these years are crucial for investing in to ensure an enabling environment for every child and thereby a sound foundation for life. This is not only the right of every child, but will also impact in the long term, on the quality of human

capital available to a country, like India, whose main asset in the years to come will be its 'youth power'(Kaul and Sankar, NUEPA, 2009).

In the Indian context, there is ample evidence to show that ECCE contributes to the successful completion of primary education. A longitudinal study on four cohorts of 31,483 children across eight states demonstrated that children with ECE experience had 15-20 percent greater probability of continuing in primary school, and not dropping out (NCERT, 1993). In another evaluation of the ECE scheme in nine backward states, children with ECE exposure scored better on various school readiness parameters, such as writing readiness, sound discrimination, pairing of objects, classification etc (UNESCO, 2006).

Findings of some macro level commissioned studies conducted across the country to evaluate the ICDS and National Creche Fund and Creche Services for Children (NCAER, 2001; NIPCCD, 2004, 1995; NCERT, 2003) also concluded that ECCE, across different programs, is perceived by all stakeholders to have benefited not only the younger children themselves, but also the older siblings, particularly girls, who are freed from sibling care responsibility and enabled to join regular schools, if the timings and location are synchronized.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education and Policy framework in India**

A National Education Policy or NEP is a comprehensive framework to guide the development of education in the country. A new policy usually comes along every few decades. The latest policy NEP 2020 is India's third. It replaces the 1986 NEP, which was in place for 34 years. The first came in 1968 and the second in 1986, under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi respectively; the NEP of 1986 was revised in 1992 when P V Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister (indianexpress.com).

India has the distinction of having conceptualized and floated perhaps the world's largest program for children, modelled on the definition of Early Childhood Development (ECD) as early as in 1975. Known as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), this programme targets children, pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls from a lifecycle perspective. Non formal preschool education has been one of its six components, in addition to health and nutrition. The nomenclature, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) found its due place in the policy framework in India later in 1986 when an exclusive chapter of the National policy on Education was devoted to it. ECCE was defined, in the ways similar to ECD, as an integrated and holistic concept of care and education of children between 0-6 years from socially disadvantaged groups. This provision was seen as facilitating to lay the child's foundation for life and also a support service for girls and working mothers.

The policy emphasized the joyful nature of ECCE, especially for the 3-6 years olds, and discouraged any formal instruction of 3R's at this early stage of education. In practice, however, ECCE programs for children have assumed various nomenclatures and definitions, depending on the priority a particular program serves. These include Early Childhood Education (ECE)/ preschool education programs which are focused only on preschool education for 3-6 years olds (e.g. pre- nurseries, nurseries, kinder gartens, preparatory schools, pre primary etc). These do not have any health or nutrition component, are 'stand-alones' or part of primary schools and generally in the non-governmental or private sector (Kaul and Sankar, NUEPA, 2009).

The equity focus emerges from the fact that, on the one hand, children from the affluent families are all availing some or the other kind of ECCE facility, starting as early as two years of age. This is largely an outcome of a rapid expansion of private facilities, particularly in the urban sector. On the other, children from the lower socio-economic strata, whose need is perhaps greater due to impoverished home environments, do not have easy access to good quality programs, since ECCE is not a priority in the public sector. The argument given is that with the limitation of public resources, priority has to be given to primary education. The field reality often is that the absence of ECCE centres leads to younger children "crowding into" primary schools and affecting the classroom quality in terms of both space and teacher-pupil ratio and increasing drop-out and repetition rates in primary schools. Also, expanding primary education without providing adequate early childhood education centres also leads to children coming into schools without attaining adequate school readiness. To address this issue the system needs to later invest in 'corrective remedial measures' which is not exactly cost effective. One can go by the simple logic of 'a stitch in time saves nine' !!

Education is a great leveler and is the best tool for achieving economic and social mobility, inclusion, and equality. Initiatives must be in place to ensure that all students from such groups, despite inherent obstacles, are provided various targeted opportunities to enter and excel in the educational system.

Currently, with a lack of universal access to ECCE, a large proportion of children already fall behind within the first few weeks of Grade 1. Thus to ensure that all students are school ready, an interim 3-month play-based 'school preparation module' for all Grade 1 students, consisting of activities and workbooks around the learning of alphabets, sounds, words, colours, shapes and numbers and involving collaborations with peers and parents, will be developed by NCERT and SCERTs.

In most of the ECCE centres, there is high teacher student ratio, lack of appropriate TLM and predominance of formal teaching of 3Rs and rote memorization and lack of developmentally appropriate school readiness activities (c.f. Chandra, Gulati and Sharma; 2017)

The lack of budgets for ECCE are clearly reflected in the condensed forms in which pre-school education is implemented in Anganwadis, despite a holistic curriculum that seeks to cater to all aspects of development of the child. Studies have shown a lack of pre-school material, toys and limited activities undertaken within the centres owing to these shortages (CBPS-UNISEF, 2017; NIPCCD, 2006; c.f. Research Studies on ECCE, Save the Children 2018)

### **ECCE in National Education Policy 2020**

This National Education Policy 2020 is the first education policy of the 21st century and aims to address the many growing developmental imperatives of our country. This Policy proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education, including SDG4, while building upon India's traditions and value systems.

NEP 2020 lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities - both the 'foundational capacities' of literacy and numeracy and 'higher-order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving - but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions. (NEP 2020, education.gov.in)

The National Education Policy, 2020, is revolutionary in every sense. While the policy focuses on multiple aspects, including the need for early childhood care, inclusive education and revamping of the current curriculum, an inherent thread that runs through the policy is the interplay of education and technology. Over the last decade, India has transformed itself into an 'information intensive society' and there is a growing requirement to embrace the usage of technology in the field of education. In this regard, the policy notes that one of the central principles steering the education system will be the 'extensive use of technology in teaching and learning, removing language barriers, increasing access.

The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged through undertaking major reforms that bring the highest quality, equity, and integrity into the system, from early childhood care and education through higher education.

The new National Educational Policy comes with major structural changes within the current educational system. This policy proposed sweeping changes in school and higher education. In this paper we will be focussing on the changes recommended for School education; specifically Early Childhood Care and education. This policy envisages that the extant 10+2 structure in school education will be modified with a new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 covering ages 3-18 years. Currently children in the age group of 3-6 are not covered in the 10+2 structure as Class 1 begins at age 6. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure, a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age 3 is also included, which is aimed at promoting better overall learning, development, and well-being. This new structure divides the existing structure as per the cognitive developmental stages of a child.

A National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) for children up to the age of 8 will be developed by NCERT in two parts, namely, a sub-framework for 0-3 year- olds and a sub-framework for 3-8 year- olds, aligned with the latest research on ECCE, and National and International best practices. In particular, the numerous rich local traditions of India developed over millennia in ECCE involving art, stories, poetry, games, songs and more will also be suitably incorporated. The framework will serve as a guide both for parents and for early childhood care and education institutions. ECCE shall be delivered through a significantly expanded and strengthened system of early – childhood education institutions consisting of (a) stand-alone Anganwadis; (b) Anganwadis co-located with primary schools; (c) pre-primary schools/sections covering at least age 5 to 6 years co-located with existing primary schools; and (d) stand-alone pre-schools- all of which would recruit workers/teachers especially trained in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECCE.

Anganwadi Centres will be strengthened with high quality infrastructure, play equipment, well trained Anganwadi workers/teachers. The building should be well- ventilated, well-designed, child- friendly and well constructed with enriched learning environment. Anganwadis shall be fully integrated into school complexes/clusters, and Anganwadi children, parents, and teachers will be invited to attend and participate in school/ school programs and vice versa.

Every child will move to a “preparatory class” or “ Balvatika” (that is before class 1) with an ECCE qualified teacher; prior to age 5. Here the focus will be on developing cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities and early literacy and numeracy. The preparatory stage will comprise three years of education building on the play, discovery and activity-based pedagogical and curricular style of the foundational stage, and will also begin to incorporate some light textbooks as well as aspects of more formal but interactive classroom learning, in order to lay a solid groundwork across subjects, including reading, writing, speaking, physical education art,

languages, science and mathematics. The **mid-day meal** programme shall also be extended to the Preparatory classes in primary schools. Health check-ups and growth monitoring that are available in the Anganwadi system shall be made available to preparatory Class students of Anganwadi as well as of primary schools. ECCE will be introduced in Ashramshalas in tribal-dominated area and all formats of alternative schooling.

As per the 75<sup>th</sup> round household survey by NSSO in 2017-18, the number of out of school children in the age group of 6 to 17 years is 3.22 crores. It will be a top priority to bring these children back into the educational fold as early as possible, and to prevent further students from dropping out, with a goal to achieve 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio in preschool to secondary level by 2030.

The key overall thrust of curriculum and pedagogy reform across all stages will be to move the education system towards real understanding and learning how to learn- and away from the culture of rote learning as is largely present today. The aim comprises cognitive development but more importantly building character and creating holistic and well- rounded individuals equipped with the key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Curriculum frameworks and transaction mechanisms will be developed for ensuring the required skills and values are imbibed through engaging processes of teaching and learning.

## **Roles and responsibilities of teachers**

Current Anganwadi teachers will be trained through a systematic effort in accordance with the curricular/pedagogical framework developed by NCERT. Anganwadi workers/teachers with qualifications of 10+2 and above shall be given a 6-month certificate programme in ECCE; and those with lower educational qualifications shall be given a one-year diploma programme covering early literacy and numeracy and other relevant aspects of ECCE. Training will be mentored by the Cluster Resource centres of the School Education Department. Necessary facilities will be created for Continuous Professional Development of Teachers as well as Educators.

Teachers vacancies will be filled in time bound manner especially in disadvantaged areas, areas with high teacher-pupil ratio and areas with high rates of illiteracy. A teacher pupil ratio of 1:30 will be ensured at school level. Areas having large number of socio-economically disadvantaged students will aim for a PTR of under 25:1. Teacher Education and the Early grade curriculum will be redesigned to to have a renewed emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy.

Due to the scale of current learning crises, all viable methods will be explored to support teachers in the mission of attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy training. Peer tutoring can be taken up as as a voluntary and joyful activity for fellow students under the supervision of trained teachers and by taking due care of safety aspects.

Once infrastructure and participation of students are put in place, ensuring quality will be the key in retention of students, so that they (particularly girls and students from other socio-economically disadvantaged groups ) do not loose interest in attending school. Teachers with knowledge of local languages will be deployed to areas with high dropout rates as well as overhauling the curriculum to make it more engaging and useful.

**Shortfalls of NEP 2020-** The good intention and visionary aspects of NEP with respect to ECCE are commendable but one can not ignore the language barrier which might be created for early learners. Policy advocates the mother tongue for instruction in foundational years of learning which is a good approach but not teaching English language at all will result into creation of an atmosphere of discomfort later when students will be introduced to the subject after approximately seven years. This will also further the differences in sections of society. While the students in government ECCE centres will be taught in their respective regional languages, their counterparts in private ECCE centres will be introduced to English from early years. When these learners will enter the next educational stage (Middle stage) where they will be introduced with new curriculum and text books (also in English language) the students with regional language experience in foundational years might not perform at par with their counterparts who had English language exposure in foundational years.

It can also be argued, that policy talks about the cumulative brain development of the child which occurs prior to age 6. Further it is scientifically proven that child can learn more than one language at this stage. Then English language exposure (listening and speaking skills) should have been recommended by the policy.

Further the success of the recommendations of the policy solely depends on its implementation. It is definitely better than earlier policies on paper. The provisions should be justified on ground level with proper channelization of resources and adequate management.

## Conclusion

Research around the globe has demonstrated both short and long term benefits of good quality ECCE programs on children's development, particularly in poverty contexts, as they compensate



for the deprivations children may experience at home. If well implemented, ECCE programs can provide children a head start and enhance their chances for an improved quality of life. Some well designed longitudinal studies from developed countries have demonstrated that ECCE programs typically contribute to improvements in children's health, cognitive ability, academic performance and school retention. Long term benefits could be "higher incomes, higher incidence of home ownership, lower rates of incarceration and arrest". (The world Bank, 2005 c.f. NUEPA 2009)

Early Childhood years are also called Foundational years of learning. Currently, children in the age group of 3-6 years are not covered in the 10+2 structure. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure, a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education from age 3 is included. This aimed at promoting better overall learning development, and well being. Over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6. It is important to have appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years to ensure healthy brain development and growth. ECCE ideally consists of flexible, multifaceted, multi-level, play-based, activity based and inquiry- based learning. ECCE comprises alphabet, 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 includes a focus on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork and cooperation. ECCE shall be covered through a system of early childhood education institutions consisting of—standalone Anganwadis, Anganwadis co-located with primary schools, Pre- primary schools co-located with existing primary schools, stand-alone pre-schools. All such schools would recruit teachers specially trained in the curriculum and pedagogy of ECCE. Anganwadis will be strengthened with high-quality infrastructure, equipments and well trained teachers alongwith well ventilated, well- designed, child- friendly building with an enriched learning environment.

Current Anganwadi teachers will be trained through a systematic effort in accordance with the pedagogical framework developed by NCERT. The responsibility for ECCE curriculum and pedagogy will lie with MHRD to ensure its continuity from pre- primary school through primary school.

Before age 5, every child will move to a "Preparatory Class" (Balvatika) which has an ECCE-qualified teacher. The learning in the Preparatory Class shall be based primarily on play- based learning with a focus on developing cognitive, affective, psychomotor abilities and early literacy and numeracy. Also, children are unable to learn optimally when they are undernourished or

unwell. The nutrition and health of children will be addressed through healthy meals. All school children shall undergo regular health check-ups for 100% immunization in school.

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, literacy and numeracy.

It is suggested that policy should have suggested sufficient exposure to English language along with regional languages during foundational years of learning so that the students do not find the language (English) alien when they enter the next stage of learning in school that is middle stage. Also this would reduce the possibility of low achievement levels or falling behind their counterparts who have attended private ECCE centres; in middle stage of learning just because of handling altogether new language.

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