



Early Childhood Education - Coming Out of the Flux

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In this article, we sketch the status of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs in the country and discuss the various levels at which professionals are engaged in the delivery of ECE programs. We further recommend some core theoretical understandings that professionals working in ECE ought to know with the assumption that ECE as a domain of study in Higher Education has the potential to change the quality of ECE programs offered to children on the ground. We recommend and hope that with the national thrust on ECCE there will be more rigorous efforts to offer Higher Education programs to ECE professionals.

India is at the threshold of change in Early Childhood Education, with the notification of the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in September 2013. This recognition of the importance of early years, while late, we hope will give fresh impetus to high-quality and universal ECCE across the country. In absence of a regulatory mechanism till date, there has been a mushrooming growth of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers in the country over the last two decades. The assumption that there is nothing special in knowing about children – that, “We all were children once and we have children of our own, so we know about them and what to do for them” has driven many people into the lucrative business of preparing children for ‘schooling’. With a (genuine) need for children to ‘start early’, with making them literate (if we may call knowing ‘A, B, C...and 1, 2, 3...’) and prepare them for school, most ECE programs are developed as downward spiral of elementary education with a few songs and stories to go along. People with folk understanding of child rearing, and no or little knowledge of developmental processes of learning and teaching, equally participate in ECE programs, resulting in a mixed set of programs being available to the community at large – both in rural and urban the same.

On the other hand, developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive programs exist in Laboratory schools of University Departments in the country, some interesting programs run by NGOs and private schools. We also find ECE programs that have emerged following a specific ideology and practice promoted by philosophers such as Maria Montessori and others. But these are still a handful. Alongside, there are the government run Anganwadi centers as a part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme that are expected to implement an ECE component while catering to other aspects such as nutrition and health under the scheme. Thus, we can see multiple tracks operating within the ECE space in India.

Parents and community in today’s competitive and English language driven scenario prefer programs that will help the child ‘fit’ in the school setting. Nevertheless, the nature and quality of program being offered still remains a responsibility of the owners of the pre-school. Whereas, if quality developmentally appropriate programs are to be made available, the government needs to put into place a regulatory mechanism. The academia of the country needs to recognize early years education as an important area for higher education, research and development.

Many people, (we would refer to them as ‘professionals’ hereafter) participate in different capacities to make an ECE program available to young children. Here, we will discuss the various levels at which these professionals contribute, and the kind of education they would require in order to offer quality program to young children of our country.

We list a few kinds of professionals engaged at various levels - from those who directly engage with children to those who are far removed in terms of direct engagement:

- The teacher/caregiver who is directly engaging with children on a day-to-day basis. They are also referred to as grass root level or frontline functionaries - they are the Anganwadi workers in ICDS system, and the teacher in every private or government run pre-school.
- The second group is the supervisor group. They are in direct contact with the caregivers i.e. the Anganwadi workers. They monitor the day-to-day activities of the caregivers and ideally should also be mentors to them. Large pre-school chains may have curriculum developers and pre-school program coordinators for each age group.
- The third group is at the highest level within the ECE program group. Within the ICDS scheme they are the Child Development Project Officers (CDPO). They monitor large number of Anganwadis and ideally should be leaders for implementing quality services. They guide the supervisors. In private pre-schools they are the Principals or Heads of Pre-school programs.
- The fourth group in the ladder is the teacher trainer group. Under the ICDS scheme, they design and implement programs to train the different cadres of people. In the private sector, they are trainers at the institutes of nursery teachers training that train pre-school teachers.

Over and above these four categories of professionals that would be more or less directly involved with an early years program (either ICDS or others in the private space); the field of Early Childhood needs qualified professionals who can support policy development, advocate ECE and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE); designers of learning materials, toys and books for children; researchers and so on. In order to work effectively at each of these levels, thorough understanding of ECE as a domain of study would be necessary.

It is unfortunate that in our country, since Early Childhood Education as a field of practice has remained unorganized and unregulated, the field as a discipline of study and enquiry has also found limited attention. Given this history, there is dearth of quality higher education programs for people involved at each of the above levels. Specialized training in ECE as a domain will enable development of quality ECE curriculum, and design spaces that provide opportunities to young children for

development of physical-motor, psycho-social, cognitive and creative domains. The design and selection of materials for children will be age as well as domain appropriate. Professionals with understanding of ECE will be able to develop training programs, and provide trainings to future teachers of young children, and administrators of the ECE institutions. Having discussed so far 'why' higher education in ECE is the need of the hour, we now present 'what' should encompass a quality higher education program.

Quality ECE programs for young children would demand an academically deep and theoretically rigorous understanding of the why, when, what and how of early years education. Therefore, while the content and nature of training program would vary depending on the needs and role expectations of each level of professional on field, there would be some core theoretical content that will remain common and foundational in an ECE higher education program curriculum. Also, an important element that should run through all programs is direct engagement and practice of working with children. A substantial part of the program; almost equal per cent as that of theory should be designed in a manner that participants have an opportunity for hands on experience with children, observing them, assessing children, designing learning materials, practice in designing programs and so on.

The core theoretical aspects could be broadly divided into three areas. i.e. understanding development of children, curriculum for early years and working with young children. Within each of these broad areas, some specific theoretical content that will need focus are:



Understanding Growth and Development of Children; Domains of Development; Process of Learning for Children; Factors Influencing Children; Philosophies of Early Childhood; Theories of Child Development; and Involvement of Parent and Community

Research as well as practice indicates that every individual who works with and for children should be aware about these basic aspects on children and childhood.

Other important subject matter content on working with children and curriculum that will need attention in a program on ECE would be: *Guiding Children's Growth, Behavior and Development; Learning Outcomes for Children and Related Experiences; Curriculum and Assessment; Music Movement and Story For Children; Ethical Considerations in Working With Young Children; Understanding Cultural Contexts, Inclusion of Gender and Children With Special Needs; Research with Young Children*

While engaging with each of these specific curricular components, two important elements would have to be woven across: understanding the socio-cultural diversity of children, and ethical considerations for working with children. Everyone concerned with ECE programs would need to understand the varied contexts of children in our country such as rural, urban, tribal, family type, diversity of caste, class, language, gender and so on. The educational programs should help professionals understand this complex diversity of children in pre-school settings and celebrate the individuality that children bring with them. All programs of early childhood education, for all cadres of professionals have to help them recognize, appreciate, be sensitive to every child.

Settings that engage with young children and their education would need firm ethical basis for action in varied situations. There is a need for people who would follow ethical approaches while working with young children, and take ethical decisions in case of dilemmas.

In addition to all of the above, those in supervisory positions, who execute, monitor and mentor others, will need both theoretical and practical understanding of these processes. They would need

to understand the difference between monitoring and mentoring and how these interplay in practice.

This understanding of the domain of early childhood education will impact the formulation, execution as well as monitoring of ECE programs. The decisions made by all practitioners in Anganwadis or pre-schools, or by policy makers and advocates will not be ad hoc, but based on strong theoretical grounding and practical relevance. The actions on the ground will have some firm basis and may result in reasonably predictable outcomes. It will help recognize the need, and offer programs for 'holistic development' of young children in pre-school set-ups and not merely for preparing children to 'fit' school.

To conclude, the child and her holistic development ought to be at the center of every process in an early childhood program. While our rich cultural practices provide some insights to work with children, in-order to provide quality experience to all children in early years, professionally trained individuals on specific content knowledge of the domain are needed at all levels that operate in the ECE space. The intention of our policy makers is clear with the thrust on ECE in the 12th five year plan, as well as the approval of National Policy on ECCE. The need for trained professionals in the area is even more apparent if quality inputs are to be given on the ground in order to achieve the standards that are laid down in the National Policy. Higher Education in our country has been successful in recognizing Elementary Education and Teacher Education as important areas of study. It is time that Early Childhood Education also achieves its due.





Photo Credit: Medak ECE Initiative Team, Azim Premji Foundation

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