



Recognising the Rights of Unheard Voices

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As Gabriela Mistral (1948) rightly said that -“We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer "Tomorrow".His name is "Today".”

Early Childhood Education (ECE), meaning the pre-school years, is when a holistic curriculum is developed across different domains of development. The cognitive, social, language and emotional development are of equal importance to a child. In these terms ECE provides prospects for interaction, affection, stimulation, learning through exploration and discovery. It contributes in holistic development of young children and promotes school readiness through play way activities and materials.

It is globally acknowledged that the first eight years of child life are the most critical formative years for lifelong development and there are several known reasons behind this. Numerous researches in the field provide convincing evidence which proves that ‘experience based brain development in the early years sets neurological and biological pathways that affect health, learning and behavior throughout life’.(For example: Chatterjee P., 2007. Child malnutrition rises in India despite economic boom. Lancet)

Some significant observations at the grassroots level raise issues and concerns for poor transformation of ECCE (or Early Childhood Care and Education) programmes into a field reality

- Despite the availability of various government early childhood services such as early learning activities and nutrition services, many children/families either have a very little access

or the quality of the available services delimit the access or are simply excluded from the access.

- Even after special efforts for facilitating convergence between various ministries and departments responsible for nutrition, health, early education and development of children, still there is lack of coordination, convergence and also low awareness and clarity regarding ECCE among functionaries and families.
- Absence of policy and action framework, supervision and monitoring at all levels is the other critical area demanding immediate attention.

The following is a direct observation from the field (basically focusing two issues under a big umbrella) which gives another view of ECE centres from the viewpoint of ‘Equity & Inclusion’

In my visit to some of the ECE (Anganwadi) centres at certain clusters of Uttarkashi district, a very evident example of equity & inclusion was observed and thus can make one believe a philosophy that *“Our task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within ourselves that we have built against it”*.

Undoubtedly there is a lot to applaud on the issue of equity & inclusion with focus on ECE Centre’s (Anganwadi centres i.e. AWCs). But of course, with many pros, some cons also do exist. Inequity or exclusion is when systematic discrimination is practiced against various reasons beyond control, and one such reason is differently abled (children) with special need & care. The factors may be varied but, for instance, social factors – which are deep-rooted in socio-cultural practices, are responsible for this exclusion (visible & invisible too).

Differently-abled children are sympathized with or made to feel unusual by being kept aloof from other kids at the centre or being provided with special

considerations which draws attention of other children/outsiders or by being introduced differently to visitors. Sometimes there is frequent mention of some quite apparent reasons behind improper functioning of a part of the body. These things were clearly visible in the visits to the centres and in interaction with Anganwadi teachers or helpers. This evidently affects the child's confidence, responsiveness, expressions, emotions, participation and makes her/him unnecessarily sensitive towards her/his abilities. Where EQUITY is concerned it takes into account varied needs of the child and aims at approaches which could respond to specific needs. At the level of ECE, apart from taking special care of children with special needs, it is also about being concerned about relative disparities or disadvantages (in this case, psychological or emotional, physiological, etc.) within the classroom, family or society in accessing/utilising services. The area of concern is provision of services to be made to overcome the disadvantages. At a larger level, it is about accessibility of services to those without any significant representation or inability to articulate demands, etc.

The process of inclusion is also not just about providing access to services (one of the main responsibility of AWC), but to have community involvement in all the process of ensuring their rights & thus, recognise their needs, promoting their important role in planning & managing service delivery & providing training/awareness/education to ensure sustainability.

Thus, recognising and understanding the differential needs of different children (each child is unique in her/his own way) and also identifying, supporting & implementing appropriate solutions.

Another significant problem that often seems to be overlooked at the ECE centres is absence of safe sanitation facilities and hygiene practices, though provision of proper sanitation and attempts for its universal coverage (including public institutions) has always been a challenge for a country like ours. Yet today, this is a shameful fact that these children coming to the ECE centres defecate in the open; this is a factor contributing to the most appalling concentration of disease among them and the poor standards of hygiene. The questions arising here are- who are these children, whom do they belong

to, whose responsibility are they, why are they left out, not reached or not served, why do they not use facilities or practice the key behaviors so crucial for their own health and hygiene.

The observation and analysis behind this issue reinforces what is already known: that equity and inclusion are not a matter only of no discrimination based on caste, religion, region, gender, economic status, etc. but also that all sections of people are reached and served and not shut out for any reasons.

In the case of ECE centres, the issue of sanitation and hygiene practices may be getting overlooked because it requires extra effort and energy from the worker's or the helper's side as the children attending centre belong to the age group of 2.5 – 6 years. Even if it is not so, then also mere commitment to action will not work, unless policies, investments and actions are based on the principle of equity, which is essentially the principle of fairness. Equity and inclusion comprise acknowledging that each child is different and needs specific support and care as well as measures to overcome the specific impediments that stand in the way of their being able to access and use services sustainably.

The journey in this field has been a personal adventure of reaching out and beyond, into places of the heart and mind I always wanted to explore and work with. It gives me junctures and moving encounters to recount the wonder of innocent, unpredictable lives, of the struggles, dreams, triumphs and the spirit behind such policies and programmes. I see following as some of the recommendations which can significantly help to improve the design and therefore effectiveness of ECE programme.

- A community mobilization initiative (like Udaan Yatra undertaken in Chhattisgarh) to generate community awareness on the importance of parenting as well as the criticality of Early Childhood Education as part of the ICDS
- A joint assessment of ground realities and suggest strategies for appropriate policy and implementation to strengthen ICDS
- An assessment of the effectiveness of implementation of the ECE approach at the ground level from conception, planning and

allocation of resources to interdepartmental convergence and existing capacities within government, processes of material development, training and capacity building strategy and methodology

- Along with the above a review of the processes, challenges and outcomes in terms of enhancing capacities of the ECE/ICDS functionaries in implementing the ECE/ECCE programme
- Ascertain and suggest suitable implementation strategies like training, monitoring mechanism/s, so as to strengthen the convergence among the stakeholders, shift of ECE component (as ECCE) from WCD Department to Education Department (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) and follow-up support
- Understanding the processes, challenges and constraints faced in development and distribution of material, resource allocation, training, follow-up and monitoring of functionaries involved in instituting & implementing ECE, convergence with other departments, and roles played by each stakeholder; and in view of these identifying strategies for strengthening ECE
- Documenting and disseminating the experiences, promising practices and lessons learnt from states performing well in ECE and suggesting replicable models for integration in ICDS would serve as a significant instrument for motivation and change.

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