



Early Childhood Care and Education: The Way Forward

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Abstract

This study undertakes a survey of literature on early childhood care and education (ECCE). The aim is to provide an understanding of the schemes that were adopted by the government for achieving personality development among children, specific to their lifetime learning and well-being. To accomplish this motive, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was initiated in 1975 by the government to cater for the needs of children in the age group of 0-6 years and to check infant and child mortality rates. Further, in the last five decades, the government has focused on several programs under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) for child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

We focus on the Anganwadi scheme, which is an inseparable part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), designed to provide support services to pregnant women and lactating mothers and prepare children for schooling and holistic development. Specifically, our paper focuses on the present scenario of early childhood care and education (ECCE), challenges faced by pre-primary school workers which subsequently causes implementation failure, and suggestions for the policy implications to eradicate the existing challenges for improvising the program efficiency.

Keywords: Integrated Child Development Service, Anganwadi, Children, Lifetime Learning, Support Service

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The development of a nation depends on the education and care provided to its citizens for nurturing their ability to be responsible citizens. Education serves as an instrument to eradicate illiteracy and malnutrition from the nation. Special care and education from the grassroots level are needed for the development of the personality of children which in turn helps for national growth. Education is required for inculcating desirable values and mortality among children. The development of a nation depends on the development of children who will take the nation forward. Education commission (1964-66) stated “the destiny of India is being shaped inside the classroom”. Thus, today’s child is the future of our nation. In order to shape the future of India, special attention to holistic development of children should be given high priority. It has been observed that 90 percent of brain development takes place in the early stage (Brown and Jernigan 2012). This period is a sensitive period for development of some cognitive, linguistic, social and psychomotor competencies among children. Thus, the Government of India initiated the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in 1975 to cater to the needs of the development of children in the age group of 0-6 years and to check infant and child mortality rates. The main objective of this Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is nurturing children through providing proper early childhood care and education. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not only concerned with readiness for primary school, its goal is to provide a strong and comprehensive basis for lifetime learning and well-being by meeting the child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs holistically. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) stated “The early childhood stage is the most critical period when the foundations are laid for life-long

development and the fullest development of the brain's potential. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) essentially provides care, activities, and experiences to early children that promote their overall development— physical, mental, social and emotional, and school readiness. It will be helpful to shape the future of the children”. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) offers the possibility to nurture caring, capable, and responsible future citizens. It provides the opportunity to create future citizens who are compassionate, capable, and responsible.

Objectives of Early Childhood Care and Education

Early Childhood Care and education is helpful for promoting access to universal, joyful, inclusive learning opportunities for ensuring all-round development of all children between 3–6 years of age. It aims at drawing out individual potentiality and providing guidance to develop it. It prepares students for primary education, which is the base for success and productivity in future. Thus, the aim of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is to facilitate optimum development of the child’s innate potentiality and lay the foundation for holistic development and lifelong learning. In order to achieve this end, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) and National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum framework (NECCECF-2013) have been suggested different objectives. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) has been given priority to the following objectives:

- Holistic development of the child to enable him/her to realize his/her maximum potential.
- Preparation for schooling and
- Providing support services for women and girls.

According to National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum framework (2013) the objectives are to

- Ensure each child is valued, respected, feels safe and secure and develops a positive self-concept
- Enable a sound foundation for physical and motor development of each child- as per each child’s potential.
- Imbibe good nutrition routines, health habits, hygiene practices and self-help skills.
- Enable children for effective communication and foster both receptive and expressive language.
- Promote development and integration of the senses.

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- Stimulate intellectual curiosity and develop conceptual understanding of the world around by providing opportunities to explore, investigate and experiment.
- Enhance development of prosocial skills, social competence and emotional wellbeing.
- Develop a sense of aesthetic appreciation and stimulate creative learning processes.
- Imbibe culturally and developmentally appropriate behavior and core human values of respect and love for fellow human beings.
- Enable a smooth transition from home to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Center to formal schooling.
- Enhance scope for overall personality development.

Thus, both the frameworks have focused on holistic development wherein the child develops socially, mentally, emotionally and physically. In addition to this, National Education Policy (2020) emphasizes on developing desirable values and life skills i.e., social capacities, sensitivity, good behavior, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation among children at an early stage that is needed for the development of sustainability in India. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) intends to develop a healthy attitude, good values, skills of critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, technology, literacy and socioemotional development. It will be helpful for the development of a positive self-concept, life skills for personal-social adjustment, inculcation of values, social attitudes and manners, creativity amongst others. Hence, it is imperative to check the performance of several adopted programs for the successful completion of the above-mentioned objectives. Further, this will enable us to identify the crucial challenges faced by the workers, which are the hurdles on the way to achieving desirable goals of early childhood care and education (ECCE).

The Present Scenario: An insight into the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Since 1975, the Anganwadi system has been widely used in India (MWCD 2018). Anganwadi, a centrally sponsored scheme is also coming under Umbrella Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) as a part of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It is a type of childcare Centre that is concerned about hunger and malnutrition of children up to 6 year-old. Around 158 million consists of children in the age group of 0-6 years (2011 Census). Basically, Anganwadi service scheme is meant for providing six services to children, pregnant women and lactating mothers, i.e., 1) supplementary nutrition, 2) immunization, 3)

health check-up, 4) referral services, 5) preschool non-formal education, & 6) nutrition and health education. Presently, 13.83 lakh Anganwadi centers are running across India (MWCD Report,2021). As per Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) report 2015, in India, 1253248 Anganwadi Centers are offering pre-primary education to children aged 3-6 years having 4038672 workers. At the same time, 1258166 Anganwadi Centers are providing supplementary nutrition to children, pregnant women and lactating mothers. In order to provide nutritional support to children, there are provisions for meals and breakfast based on a healthy diet plan. Although the healthy diet plan is formulated at district level, it is not implemented properly. It is due to the poor knowledge of Anganwadi workers regarding revised norms for calories and protein for children (Malik et. al.,2015). As a result, 35.7% of children under 5 years of age are underweight and 38.4% are stunted in India (National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2015). Various initiatives are also undertaken at the national, state, and district levels to ensure the survival, health, nutrition, care, and education of children in their early years in the form of policy and programs such as the National Nutrition Policy, the National Policy for Children (NPC), and the National Health Mission (NHM) etc. Anganwadi workers' knowledge, abilities, and competences need to be updated and refreshed. Hence, there are provision of induction training, in-service training, theme-based skill specific training, and refresher training. Refresher training is provided in each two-year gap under supervision of Anganwadi supervisors. Scrutiny committee along with mothers committee are also there to provide assistance and check activities for successfulness of the program. It will be helpful to execute their duties effectively i.e., plan and execute activities, be resourceful to manage activities, create conducive learning environment, identify children strength and weakness.

There are also private schools that have pre-primary section. In addition to this there are also standalone preprimary school. In order to achieve these objectives of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the need for an appropriate pedagogy is highly demanded.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): Pedagogy

In this stage, the children learn through playing, manipulating objects, observation and imitation. They are more curious about the immediate environment. Thus, they strive to understand the things around them by asking questions. Now the Anganwadi workers are teaching children through play way, activity-based and thematic approach. In thematic approach, Anganwadi workers teach contents and skills by integrating contents of curriculum around theme. Here, all activities are centered around children's need, interest and ability to make learning joyful. The Anganwadi workers prefer to make small homogeneous groups

based on age level before imparting instruction and executing activity. National Education Policy (NEP 2020) has emphasized on flexible, multi-faceted multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning. The education of children in early days should be integrated with activities in which children learn through collaboration, teamwork, playing, activity based on their interest to make learning joyful (NEP, 2020). In this context, the other methods which are effective and can be adopted are:

Montessori Method

The Montessori method was developed by Dr. Maria Montessori. Every child is a unique and natural being as per their innate potentiality, so special care and education is needed accordingly. This method emphasizes on making small multi age groups that facilitate learning from peers and learning through imitate seniors at their own pace. It will be beneficial to pupils' creative development through self-directed, exploratory, and personalized learning experiences Hence, it contributes to national development by developing leadership, coordination and concentration skills.

Reggio Emilia Method

This method is propounded by Reggio Emilia based on constructivism approach in which the teacher is a co-worker with children. Teachers collaborate with colleagues and parents also to plan activities to make children confident in their inner ability to deal with any problems they face in learning as well as real life. Here children learn at their own pace and are encouraged to try anything, make mistakes and discover new and better methods.

The Effective implementation of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) depends on its approach; however, some challenges are also there as roadblocks.

Sand on the Wheels? The identification of Challenges

The Anganwadi workers are the key persons for implementing Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), their education level and knowledge about nutrition plays an important role related to their performance in the Anganwadi Centers. However, it is seen they do not have sufficient knowledge about the growth charts of children and the importance of growth monitoring at an early stage (Manhas and Dogra, (2012)). The job satisfaction of workers is necessary for effective implementation of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); however, low honorarium decreases job satisfaction among Anganwadi workers (Thakare, (2011)). Delay and insufficient funds for providing nutritional support to children act as roadblock for performing their job effectively (Joshi et al.). The biggest operational challenge that Anganwadi employees encounter is their workload due to their multiple responsibilities (Tripathy et al., 2014). Anganwadi Centers have lack of infrastructure facilities and poor

knowledge of Anganwadi workers about achieving ECCE (Malik et al., (2015). Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) do not have sufficient health assessment tools for promoting, monitoring physical and mental development (Sahoo et al.,2016).

The Way Forward: Suggestions

After analyzing all these challenges, some of the suggestions have been given by authors to overcome the hurdles regarding effective implementation of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which are as follows:

- It should be made mandatory for all private pre-primary schools to be certified by regulatory bodies.
- In order to upgrade the knowledge and skills of pre-primary school workers, Government Agencies, NGOs and university department should conduct training and refresher courses regularly.
- Curriculum should be reframed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), university department and NGOs according to the guidelines of National Education Policy (NEP,2020).
- In addition to thematic approach, play-way method, Montessori method and Reggio Emilia method should be adopted by the Anganwadi workers.
- The Government should take steps towards enhancing the honorarium/ salary of Anganwadi workers and helpers and also institute a pension scheme for them.
- The provision of transportation and residence facilities should be provided to the Anganwadi supervisors as they have to check and guide many Anganwadi centers across a block.
- The members of the scrutiny committee and mother committee should also be provided training for bringing awareness about the duties and responsibilities they have to execute.
- The Anganwadi and private pre-primary schools must be restructured as a vibrant child-friendly Early Childhood Development Center. The government should provide adequate infrastructure, financial and human resources.
- It's also important to think about good implementation procedures and how to follow up on them. As can be observed, a large number of programs have been conceptualized, however implementation and follow-up are rarely carried out.
- Adequate fund should be released on the basis of the planned diet chart in time.

- In order to reduce the workload of Anganwadi workers, they should be excluded in providing services to pregnant women and lactating mothers and any other service except providing care and education to children.

7. Conclusion

Anganwadi workers face several challenges that cause implementation failure on the way of achieving the goals of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Further, we have proposed several suggestions not only to eradicate the challenges but also to improve the efficiency of the Anganwadi program.

The proposed suggestions in this paper will go a long way in ensuring holistic development of children, optimal efficiency of the pre-primary schools and help to eradicate the challenges, which could be more effective in enhancing the efficiency and assist in policy making.

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