



EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE EDUCATION IN INDIA

Education

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ABSTRACT

There is strong evidence that early childhood care and education (ECCE) is one of the best investments a country can make to prepare children for learning and allow them to thrive later in life. Children who benefit from quality early childhood education programs are better prepared for primary school and will reach better education outcomes. Quality ECCE also helps reduce repetition and drop-out rates, improves school readiness, and increases school achievement. Positive outcomes are even more pronounced among children from vulnerable groups. Recognizing the benefits of investing in ECCE, the Sustainable Development Goals include a target to ensure that all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. In the past decade, all regions of the world have increased enrollments in pre-primary education. But despite significant progress, many challenges remain to ensure that all children have access to quality ECCE services. Early childhood is defined as the period from conception through eight years of age. The earliest years of a child's life are critical. These years determine child's survival and thriving in life, and lay the foundations for her/ his learning and holistic development. It is during the early years that children develop the cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills that they need to succeed in life. These early experiences are largely determined by supportive family and community care practices, proper nutrition and health care, learning opportunities, which in turn are dependent on enabling policies and investments for young children and families. ECE positively impacts attendance, retention, and learning of children in elementary and higher education.

KEYWORDS

Full Paper

Early childhood, defined as the period from birth to eight years old, is a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. During this stage, children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them. Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than 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. 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'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. Early childhood education (ECE; also nursery education) is a branch of education theory which relates to the teaching of young children (formally and informally) up until the age of about eight. Infant and toddler education, a subset of early childhood education, denotes the education of children from birth to age two (The scope of early childhood education, 2010). It emerged as a field of study during the enlightenment, particularly in European countries with high literacy rates (E.M. Daniel, 2016). It continued to grow through the nineteenth century as universal primary education became a norm in the Western world. In recent years, early childhood education has become a prevalent public policy issue, as municipal, state, and federal lawmakers consider funding for preschool and pre-K. (National Governor's Association). It is described as an important period in child's development. It refers to the all round development of a child's personality. The history of early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the development of care and education of children between zero and eight years old throughout history. ECCE has a global scope, and caring for and educating young children has always been an integral part of human societies. Arrangements for fulfilling these societal roles have evolved over time and remain varied across cultures, often reflecting family and community structures as well as the social and economic roles of women and men. Historically, such arrangements have largely been informal, involving family, household and community members. While the first two years of a child's life are spent in the creation of a child's first "sense of self", most children are able to differentiate between themselves and others by their second year. This differentiation is crucial to the child's ability to determine how they should function in relation to other people. Parents can be

seen as a child's first teacher and therefore an integral part of the early learning process. Early childhood attachment processes that occurs during early childhood years 0–2 years of age, can be influential to future education. With proper guidance and exploration children begin to become more comfortable with their environment, if they have that steady relationship to guide them. Parents who are consistent with response times, and emotions will properly make this attachment early on. If this attachment is not made, there can be detrimental effects on the child in their future relationships and independence. There are proper techniques that parents and caregivers can use to establish these relationships, which will in turn allow children to be more comfortable exploring their environment.

Learning through play

A child exploring comfortably due to having a secure attachment with caregiver. Early childhood education often focuses on learning through play, based on the research and philosophy of Jean Piaget, which posits that play meets the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs (PILES) of children. Children's curiosity and imagination naturally evoke learning when unfettered. Learning through play will allow a child to develop cognitively (Parenting for brain). Thus, children learn more efficiently and gain more knowledge through activities such as dramatic play, art, and social games. Tassoni, P. (2000) suggested that "some play opportunities will develop specific individual areas of development, but many will develop several areas." Thus, it is important that practitioners promote children's development through play by using various types of play on a daily basis. Allowing children to help get snacks ready helps develop math skills (one-to-one ratio, patterns, etc.), leadership, and communication. Key guidelines for creating a play-based learning environment include providing a safe space, correct supervision, and culturally aware, trained teachers who are knowledgeable about the Early Years Foundation. Davy (2000) stated that the British Children's Act of 1989 links to play-work as the act works with play workers and sets the standards for the setting such as security, quality and staff ratios. Learning through play has been seen regularly in practice as the most versatile way a child can learn. Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) suggested that children should be given free school meals, fruit and milk, and plenty of exercise to keep them physically and emotionally healthy. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) believed that play time allows children to talk, socially interact, use their imagination and intellectual skills. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) believed that children learn through movement and their senses and after doing an activity using their senses. When young students have group play time it also helps them to be more empathetic towards each other. In a more contemporary approach, organizations such as the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promote child-guided learning experiences, individualized

learning, and developmentally appropriate learning as tenets of early childhood education. Piaget provides an explanation for why learning through play is such a crucial aspect of learning as a child. However, due to the advancement of technology, the art of play has started to dissolve and has transformed into "playing" through technology (Wolpert, S. 2009). Technology is beginning to invade the art of play and a balance needs to be found. Many oppose the theory of learning through play because they think children are not gaining new knowledge. In reality, play is the first way children learn to make sense of the world at a young age. As children watch adults interact around them, they pick up on their slight nuances, from facial expressions to their tone of voice. They are exploring different roles, learning how things work, and learning to communicate and work with others. These things cannot be taught by a standard curriculum, but have to be developed through the method of play. Many preschools understand the importance of play and have designed their curriculum around that to allow children to have more freedom. Once these basics are learned at a young age, it sets children up for success throughout their schooling and their life. Many Early Childhood programs provide real life props and activities to enrich the children's play, enabling them to learn various skills through play (Teaching young children magazine).

The practical implications of early childhood education

In recent decades, studies have shown that early childhood education is critical in preparing children to enter and succeed in the (grade school) classroom, diminishing their risk of social-emotional mental health problems and increasing their self-sufficiency as adults. In other words, the child needs to be taught to rationalize everything and to be open to interpretations and critical thinking. There is no subject to be considered taboo, starting with the most basic knowledge of the world he lives in, and ending with deeper areas, such as morality, religion and science. Visual stimulus and response time as early as 3 months can be an indicator of verbal and performance IQ at age 4 years. By providing education in a child's most formative years, ECE also has the capacity to pre-emptively begin closing the educational achievement gap between low and high-income students before formal schooling begins. Children of low socioeconomic status (SES) often begin school already behind their higher SES peers; on average, by the time they are three, children with high SES have three times the number of words in their vocabularies as children with low SES. Participation in ECE, however, has been proven to increase high school graduation rates, improve performance on standardized tests, and reduce both grade repetition and the number of children placed in special education.

Need and challenges in India

In India, according to Census 2011 data there are 164.48 million children of 0-6 years of age. Recognizing the need to provide quality pre-primary programmes, a number of constitutional and policy provisions have been made such as the 86th Constitutional Amendment which introduced Article 21A on the right to free and compulsory education for 6-14 years old children and Article 45 to urge states to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2010 guarantees children their right to quality elementary education. ECE is not recognized as a compulsory provision by RTE, but RTE urges states to provide free pre-school education for children above three years. The 12th Five Year Plan acknowledges the importance of ECE and improving school preparedness. The Government of India approved the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy in 2013. The Policy framework also includes the National Curriculum Framework and Quality Standards for ECCE. The Policy caters to all children under 6 years of age and commits to universal access to quality early childhood education. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) is the nodal department for ECCE. MWCD is responsible for the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, which is a centrally sponsored and state administered ECCE programme, covering around 38 million children through a network of almost 1.4 million anganwadi centres (a village courtyard). ICDS includes delivery of an integrated package of services such as supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-up, preschool education, referral services and nutrition & health education. ECCE is one of the components and aims at psychosocial development of children and developing school readiness. Despite the recognition of the importance of ECE by the Government of India, the challenges in implementation still remain. There are still substantial numbers of children not enrolled in preschools. Even in elementary education, while there is a significant rise in enrolments,

the dropout rate continues to be a matter of concern, with drop outs being highest in the first two grades of elementary schooling. Learning assessments also show that literacy skills are poor in early primary grades. This points to the urgency of helping children, particularly from first generation families, develop adequate school readiness through a good quality ECE programme, to enable them to make a smooth transition.

Conclusion

Interventions in early childhood are proven to have long-term effects on future social adjustment and economic success, and may even be passed on to subsequent generations. Evidence indicates that Early Childhood Education (ECE) programmes can "change the development trajectory of children by the time of entering school". Research in the South Asian region, particularly in India, has documented the effects of Early Child Development programmes on the academic and social preparedness of children for formal schooling. 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. Early childhood education (ECE; also nursery education) is a branch of education theory which relates to the teaching of young children (formally and informally) up until the age of about eight.

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