CHAPTER III

Early Childhood Care and Education

Backdrop

Provision of comprehensive health care and education to children in the early stages of development prior to entering primary school is given a special place in the national education policies and programmes. This received further impetus in recent years with a specific mention on the subject under the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution, which enjoins the state to endeavour towards providing universal access to such services throughout the country.

Until the Eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment Act, 2001, was passed, Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy) of the Indian Constitution directed the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of fourteen. The earlier inclusion of 0-6 year-old children within this constitutional directive implied the intent to provide conditions for holistic child development with pre-school education as an important component.

The Eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment Act, 2001, has split the age group 0-14 years into two clear categories to cover their interests under separate Articles in the Constitution. Article 21A has been introduced as a fundamental right after Article 21 to read “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.” Articulating the intent to specifically cater to the needs of the 0-6-year-old children, the Eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment Act has substituted Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy) to read “The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years.”

At the time of Independence, the need for pre-school education was primarily fulfilled by voluntary organisations. It was in the 1970s that child welfare services were expanded to the health, education, nutrition and other sectors. The National Policy for Children was adopted in 1974 and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme was launched as a sequel to it in 1975.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) adopted in 1986 views early childhood care and education (ECCE) as a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development, as a feeder and support programme for primary education and also as a support service for working women. Some of the important policy directions in the NPE are as follows:

- The National Policy on Children specially emphasises investment in the development of the young child, particularly from sections of the population in which first generation learners predominate.
- Recognising the holistic nature of child development, viz., nutrition, health and social, mental, physical, moral and emotional development, ECCE will receive high priority and be suitably integrated with the ICDS programme, wherever possible. Day-care centre will be provided as a support service for universalisation of primary education, to enable girls engaged in taking care
of siblings to attend school and as a support service for working women belonging to poorer sections.

- Programmes of ECCE will be child-oriented, and focused around play and the individuality of the child. Formal methods and introduction of the 3 R’s will be discouraged at this stage. The local community will be fully involved in these programmes.

- A full integration of childcare and pre-primary education will be brought about, both as a feeder and a strengthening factor for primary education and for human resource development in general. In continuation of this stage, the School Health Programme will be strengthened.

The Tenth Five Year Plan document has reaffirmed the commitment to the young child. The approach outlined is:

- To reaffirm the commitment to the ‘Development of Children’ with a special focus on early childhood development, not only as the most desirable societal investment for the country’s future, but as the right of every child to achieve his/her full development potential

- To adopt a rights-based approach to the development of children, as advocated by the draft National Policy and Charter for Children (2002).

Some of the major strategies outlined in the Tenth Plan document include:

- Reaching every young child in the country to ensure their survival, protection and development, as prescribed in the two National Plans of Action (1992) – one for children and the other for the girl child

- To ensure development through effective implementation of policies and programmes in the areas of health, immunisation, nutrition and education through nationwide programmes such as Reproductive and Child Health (RCH), ICDS, SSA, and other related programmes.

- To continue ICDS as the mainstay for promoting the overall development of young children and mothers, especially that of the girl child all over the country.

- To recognise that while early childhood up to six years is critical for the development of children, the pre-natal to first three years is the most crucial and vulnerable period for laying the foundations for the achievement of full human development and cumulative life-long learning.

To reinforce the commitment of family-focused and community-based interventions, in addition to the institution-based interventions, which is critical for enhanced survival, growth and development of young children, adolescent girls and women across the life cycle.

**ECE in the National Context**

The ICDS programme of the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) is the largest early childhood education (ECE) programme in the country. ICDS was started in 1975 in 33 blocks as a programme for the holistic development of children under six years to break the vicious cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity and mortality. ICDS provides health, nutrition, ECE and convergence services.

ICDS also provides support to the national efforts for universalisation of primary education, through increased opportunities for promoting early development, associated with improved cognitive and social skills, enrolment and retention in the early primary stage. By releasing girls from the burden of sibling care, it also enables them to participate in primary education.
ICDS is now operating 5,725 projects in the country, with more than 620,000 operational anganwadi (childcare) centres. With this, the programme covers most of the country. The total coverage for children in the 3-6 age group under ICDS is 169,555,641. ICDS will continue to be the major programme in the Tenth Plan period for the provision of ECCE services.

For the Tenth Five-Year Plan period (2002-2007) the projected outlay for the ICDS programme is Rs. 121,468.1 million.

Early Childhood Education under DPEP

Apart from the ICDS programme of the DWCD, efforts have been made by the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy to impact the early childhood education scene through a variety of strategies under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the Mahila Samakhya project.

DPEP is conceived as a holistic programme for ensuring universal primary education (UPE), emphasising therefore the centrality of pre-school education as the foundation for achieving UPE. Since the ICDS programme already has a large presence, and was to be universalised, DPEP works closely with the ICDS programme.

The DPEP programme adopts a multi-pronged strategy for ECE. This includes working with identified ICDS centres, and strengthening them through a basket of interventions, and also increasing timings to ensure that it coincides with the formal primary school, and thus seeking to impact on the nature of the ICDS programme at the field level. DPEP also attempts to directly provide pre-school education, though not on a large scale, through selected interventions and the opening of new centres in areas where ICDS is not in operation, as well as through the opening of pre-primary classes in formal primary schools, and offering school readiness packages.

The DPEP guidelines state that

"DPEP would finance expansion of ECCE through establishment of ECCE centres in villages not eligible to be covered by ICDS. In states with limited experience of ECCE, new ECCE centres
would be financed initially on a limited scale only, in one district, or in one block per district, where inter-district variations are substantial. This activity could be scaled up gradually over the project period. The DPEP would not finance nutrition.

In order to improve the quality of ECCE, DPEP would finance development of pre-school materials and training of functionaries in the ECCE centres set up under DPEP. It would also finance the training of ICDS anganwadi/balwadi (play school) workers in forging linkages with schools."

DPEP followed a combination of different strategies for ECE. These are:

- Ensuring that school timings and AWC timings are coordinated to enable older girls who could not attend school due to sibling care burden to attend school
- Locating the school and AWC in close proximity to ensure better coordination between them
- Providing teaching-learning material (TLM) to strengthen the pre-school component
- Capacity building for ECE, mainly through training of anganwadi workers
- Academic support through the DPEP set-up

DPEP follows a combination of different strategies for ECE. These include coordination with ICDS for strengthening of the pre-school component and opening ECE centres in non-ICDS areas.

Since the ICDS programme, run by the DWCD, is the single largest provider of ECCE services in the country, the major strategy adopted by DPEP has been one of coordination with ICDS. The ICDS programme runs anganwadi centres (AWCs) in villages with a population above 1000 in selected blocks – with a relaxed norm of 700 for tribal areas. Now that the DWCD has extended the programme to cover all districts in the country, these centres will cover all DPEP districts.

The major areas of coordination involve:
- Ensuring that school timings and AWC timings are coordinated to enable older girls who could not attend school due to sibling care burden to attend school
- Locating the school and AWC in close proximity to ensure better coordination between them
- Providing teaching-learning material (TLM) to strengthen the pre-school component
- Capacity building for ECE, mainly through training of anganwadi workers
- Academic support through the DPEP set-up
Apart from these, DPEP has also set up new centres, modelled largely along the ICDS pattern. Some of the models set up under DPEP, however, have addressed specific issues of concern in the local context. The ECE centres-cum-alternative schools set up in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, for example, attempt to specifically address the question of sibling care. This has entailed site selection in villages with the need for ECE services and locating these close to the primary school, recruitment of ECE workers, as well as the development of curriculum, TLM and training modules.

These activities are carried out with the active support of resource groups that have been formed for ECE in many states. In many states an encouraging trend has been the involvement of the local community in the management of these centres, through mothers’ groups and village education committees (VECs). Academic support for these centres is often provided through the structures set up under DPEP, namely, block resource centres and cluster resource centres. Another model that has been adopted has been to open pre-primary classes in the primary school. This has been taken up on scale in the state of Assam.

All states have, regardless of the approach adopted, taken up the issue of school readiness programmes for children entering primary school. This has usually been taken up towards the end of the pre-primary stage, either ICDS or DPEP model, and in some cases in the beginning of class I, in the primary school. The school readiness programmes also ensure that the curriculum and teaching in the ECE centres and primary schools is synchronised.

Box 3.2: Balwadis: An Innovative Approach for ECCE and Community Empowerment in Uttarakhand

Supported by the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, the balwadis of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan, Almora aim at providing a quality ECCE programme to 3-6 years old children in remote, economically poor Himalayan villages in Uttarakhand.

Twenty-nine community based groups from 10 hill districts of Uttarakhand work with a common philosophy of education and development as they try to create and develop socially and ecologically sustainable rural communities through education. Starting with two villages in 1988, the programme has now not only expanded to 321 villages catering to about 7,000 children, majority of whom are girls, but also evolved from being just a learning orientation to children to a forum for child development and community education.

In Uttarakhand, the geographical conditions make it imperative to have a centre flexible both in terms of the curriculum and admission procedures. Girls start attending the centre as soon as they are three years old and are enrolled in primary schools after they attain the age of 5-6. Over the years, universal primary education of girls in all villages having a pre-primary centre has been achieved. Primary school teachers welcome children from the Balwadis as they are more confident and articulate. Most of the girls, working as teachers, are now intermediate/graduates and want to pursue further studies. An offshoot of this trend has been that girls are marrying late in villages. A network of 412 women’s groups called Uttarakhand Mahila parishad involving 12,000 rural women has been created as a direct offshoot of the balwadi programme.

Environmental education, an important component of the balwadi curriculum, aims to foster children’s awareness and knowledge about the local environment and helps develop skills to enable them to translate their knowledge into action. Children learn songs, stories, poems, games in the centre. They also plant their own flower and vegetable beds and take part in campaigns to clean the village paths and water sources.
The community owns each centre and this sense of ownership and commitment towards balwadis is the driving force for education and sustainable development:

- Communities provide a room for the centre. Villagers have donated land and provided free labor to construct small buildings called *bal bhavans*.
- Members of the women's group maintain the centre. They apply mud plaster on the walls and on the floor, help in digging the garbage pit, and installing a temporary sanitation facility near the centre. The land for these facilities is provided free by the community.
- Each year, the local NGO, the community, and the centre organise a Bal Mela jointly. Children display what they have learnt.

The strong link of education to communities through balwadi centers helps provide a secure framework of learning to children as well as the village people. In each village, where a balwadi centre is functional, a women’s group is formed. The programme is reviewed each month in village meetings organised by the women’s group as well as by the local community based group. Regular meetings are held in USNPSS to review the programme and to initiate new activities.

Although different models have been followed by the states, there are common issues that have dominated the overall strategy followed by them. The thrust areas for ECE under DPEP have been the following.

**Building stronger linkages between the primary school and the AWC/ ECE centre:**
This has included looking at issues like school readiness, transition monitoring from ECE to primary school, influencing curriculum to ensure a continuity, convergence for training of the ECE workers, augmenting infrastructure, impacting the sibling care problem for primary school-age group children, involving communities in the running or ECE centres, and convergence for monitoring.

**Impacting enrolment through relieving children from sibling care:**
Social assessments and gender studies conducted highlighted that a major problem keeping children, especially girls out of school, has been the burden of looking after younger siblings. As a strategy to ensure that primary school-going age children are not prevented from attending school on this ground, an effort has been made to synchronise the timings of the AWC/ ECE centre and the primary school, and where possible, to locate them in the same premises or in close proximity. This enables children in formal primary schools to leave siblings in the ECE centre while they attend school and to thereby impact on the enrolment of children, especially the girl child.

Since a major objective of pre-school education is to familiarise children with the school atmosphere and to prepare them to join formal primary schools, many states have tried to bring the physical location of the two together, including where possible, the same campus.

In Uttar Pradesh, for example, the state government passed an order, saying that where available, primary schools would provide the space for AWCs in their campus.

Although there are problems in implementation, especially where the primary school is far from the habitation (making it difficult for pre-primary children to attend) the need was recognised. Where this has been achieved this is not only helping the smaller children to become familiar with schools, but also helping older children in taking care of siblings, so that they can attend school.
**Transition to primary school**

A different facet of this can be seen in states which are putting in place mechanisms for monitoring the transition from ECE centres to primary school. The very process of monitoring ensures that the linkage with the primary school, as well as the need for coordination, comes to the forefront. This linkage is crucial to ensure further linkages, in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and school readiness.

**Involving communities in ECCE**

Involving communities in ECCE has been another area where states have been working. In Bihar DPEP, for example, ECE centres are established by *Mata Samitis* (mothers’ committees) who select the ECE workers, provide the space for the centres and purchase equipment/materials, etc., for the centre. They also organise *prabhat pheris* (torch rallies), *melas* (fairs) and meetings at the centres. Suitable training modules have been developed for ECE/AWC workers, ECE programme personnel, ICDS supervisors and Anganwadi Training Centre (AWTC) instructors.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The various options that emerged were:</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Self-financed childcare centres, combining day-care and pre-school activities</td>
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<td>- Linking day-care service to the existing anganwadi of ICDS</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Childcare centres only for a section of the population in the village (the poorest) where the demand is high</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Caring for children in more than one location</td>
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**ECE under Mahila Samakhya**

Many Mahila Samakhya (MS) states took up ECE activities in villages where it emerged as a felt need among the women of the sangha (women’s collectives). The process for setting up of these centres was different from those set up under other programmes, and was rooted in the MS process itself. The process followed by Mahila Samakhya in Gujarat is given below as an illustration.

It is during the analysis of women’s and girls’ problems in the sangha that the childcare needs of villages emerged. In the initial phase, an effort was made to evolve a model that suited the village conditions, with flexibility, both in form and organisation. A summary picture of each village was developed through simulated activities, where the participants shared their ideas about creating a model support system.

The highlights of childcare patterns evolved by MS in Gujarat included:
- Leadership and responsibility for childcare centres rest with the sanghas.
- Timings are fixed to suit the needs of the community.
- Programme was evolved with regard to the need for care/education.
- Collective decisions about choice of place, time, caregivers, (who, how many and how) and payments.
- Finding a safe place that can accommodate the children, and is accessible to them, with some outdoor space for play.
- Promoting varied models and catering to a wide age group, including infants, pre-schoolers and if need be, older children.
- The sanghas negotiate for resources at the local level, and with MS structures.
- Sangha members participate in the purchase of raw materials, maintenance of accounts and cooking of meals.
- Women brainstorm to explore alternative local resources from the community in the form of play material, fuel, water, floor spreads, *matkas* (pots), grains, etc. Community contributions (Rs. 5 to 10 per child) are collected towards the cost of the honorarium for the *balsakhi* (child care-giver).

Training for childcare was originally carried out by some external resource persons. MS developed specific modules for each of the components with the support of a consultant from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara. The primary concern was to adapt training to the needs of childcare centres emerging in the villages; to problems emerging in the villages; and to problems encountered by women in their initiation and management. The format took the form of camps, cluster meetings, workshops, village sangha meetings, field visits and celebrations.

**Table 3:** Coverage under various Early Childhood Care and Education Schemes 1996–97

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programmes</th>
<th>Centres Sanctioned</th>
<th>Centres Operational</th>
<th>Beneficiaries</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICDS projects sanctioned</td>
<td>5652</td>
<td>4608</td>
<td>3,15,00,000 (0-6 children) 60,00,000 (pregnant and lactating mothers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(As per the 2001 Census, number of children in the 0-6 age group was 15,78,63,145, so approximately 20 per cent children in the 0-6 age group are covered under the ICDS programme.)

**ECE under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan**

Under the scheme of SSA, the major vehicle for the provision of ECE services is the ICDS programme. However, the SSA programme has a provision for taking up ECE projects on a small scale, under the “innovations” head. A fund of Rs. 5 million is available in each district, each year for such projects (each project not to exceed Rs. 1.5 million). This can be utilised either for setting up new centres in areas where there are no ICDS centres or for strengthening linkages with the ICDS programme.

Under the proposed scheme “education of girls at the elementary level”, under the SSA framework, provision is being made for setting up of community-based childcare centres, in areas where such services are not provided under ICDS.

By the end of the Ninth Plan a total of 5,652 ICDS projects had already been sanctioned, comprising 4,533 rural blocks, 759 tribal blocks and 360 urban slums. The total number of rural and tribal blocks is now 5,488, leaving only 186 blocks uncovered. Of the projects sanctioned, 4,608 were operational by the end of the Ninth Plan. In the Tenth Plan it is envisaged that the remaining 1,044 projects will be operationalised. With this, almost the entire country will be covered under the ICDS programme.