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This issue of 'Samuhik Pahal' has been guest edited by [Vikramshila](#). It ensures quality education for all children from under resourced and at-risk social groups through action research initiatives in pedagogy, curriculum development, teacher development programs, learning centers and child protection.

Building strong foundations

The journey of early childhood education in India

Shubhra Chatterji

Evolving conceptualizations of early childhood education

The concept of early childhood education has been shaped by the evolving notion of childhood in modern times. Earlier childhood was not considered as a distinct stage of development with its own needs and characteristics, but only as a miniature version of adulthood. It was Rousseau who first spoke of the need of allowing children to develop naturally, and free from the interference of adults. Johann Pestalozzi, an educator in the early 19th century, emphasized the importance of creating safe and nurturing environments for children, where they should be allowed to learn at their own pace. He also spoke about the importance of play.

In the early 20th century, early childhood education was greatly influenced by the psychological theories of child development and growth. Later, sociologists like Emile Durkheim brought in the concept of plurality of childhoods and spoke of how childhood was experienced differently in different cultures across space and time. The concepts of childhood, how children learn, and how learning happens, are still evolving, and the recent findings of brain research around all of these have largely shaped the discourse on early childhood education in our times.

Pre-primary education in India

Maria Montessori, one of the pioneer educationists in the previous century, had a significant influence in the spread of early childhood education in India during the Second World War years, when she spent about 10 years in the country, touring

and offering courses to aspiring teachers in different parts of India. Her method of education had captivated the imagination of leading educationists in India such as Gijubhai Vadkeka, Tarabai Modak and Sarla Devi Sarabhai. There are references of Gandhi visiting a Montessori School in Saurashtra as early as 1915. Gijubhai started his Dakshinamurti Balmandir in 1920 in Bhavnager and later Tarabai Modak started her Shishu Vihar in Mumbai. A training course was started by her in 1938 to make up for the dearth of trained teachers needed to impart this kind of scientific education to children.

The educational theory of Montessori, based on the idea of freedom, self-reliance, care for the environment, and the importance of love to ignite the human spirit, found a resonance with several enlightened minds of those days, when the nationalist movement was just gaining momentum, and people were on the quest for a system of education that would serve as a key to train the young along these lines. Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi and Aurobindo were all in search of an alternative method more in harmony with Indian ideals and integrated to nature without any barriers between teachers and students, and based on the principles of love and mutual respect.

The Theosophical Society in Madras served as a base from where Montessori's ideas spread far and wide. Students from different parts of the Indian sub-continent went there to get trained by the great educator who taught them to look upon the child as a collaborator in the process of learning. It was almost like a movement that spread gently in different parts of India, reaching out to different segments of society. Although its reach was



Maria Montessori (August 31, 1870 – May 6, 1952)

limited, its significance was acknowledged by the Government of India, who in their report on education (1951) mentioned the role played by Montessori and her students in triggering the expansion of pre-primary education in the country in the 1940s.

Spread of pre-primary education through Anganwadi centres

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), a flagship program of the Indian government, was launched on October 2, 1975, as a pilot in 33 Community Development Blocks, to primarily improve the nutritional and health status of children in the country. The project was evaluated in 1979, and based on the positive results, it was extended to cover the entire country in a phased manner.

Over the years, the scope of the ICDS program has expanded to cover a wide range of services, including pre-school education for children in the 3 to 6 years age group. Today, ICDS is the largest integrated child development scheme in the world, covering over 14 lakh Anganwadi centres.

The program has played a significant role in promoting early childhood education among the rural population. Today, pre-primary education in India includes a variety of programs, such as Anganwadi centres, nursery schools, playgroups and kindergarten chains run by private entities.

Although there is a clear policy mandate about early childhood education pedagogy, there is a wide variation in the quality of pre-primary education in India, as the private sector is largely unregulated. Both NEP and NCF have articulated the principles, methods and practices to be used in the care and education of young children,

Key principles of ECE pedagogy as per NEP 2020 and NCF 2022

The national policy documents clearly mention that ECE classrooms should facilitate play-based learning. These envisage children being given the scope to explore, discover and experiment, led by their natural curiosity and desire to learn. The pedagogy is envisioned to be child-centred and is supposed to cater to the holistic development of children across all aspects of development. These include the five domains of physical, language, cognitive, social-emotional and aesthetic.

Teachers are expected by the national policy documents to be responsive to the needs and interests of young children and build positive relationships with them and their families. They are also supposed to create a supportive and nurturing learning environment. All these principles and suggested methods of teaching are informed by the latest research in brain development and best practices around the world.

Role of play in children's learning

Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori and Dewey were pioneers in the field of child education and all of them believed that the child's own instincts, activities and interests should be

the starting point of education. They spoke about the importance of play and exploration as the child's natural way of learning. With the emerging concepts of childhood, the ideas around child-centric education got more crystalized. Scholars and educationists like Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky and Gardner have further strengthened these ideas. According to them, children construct their own knowledge by assimilating new experiences with their existing knowledge.

Vygotsky spoke of how the active engagement of children with other more experienced and knowledgeable persons results in expanding their learning. Bruner highlighted the importance of a spiral curriculum in multi-age/mixed group settings, where the same set of topics are taught to a child at graduating levels of difficulty for a full three-year period through different experiences.

The dichotomy between play and learning in India

Although these progressive ideas around play as children's way of learning are widely accepted by educationists, there exists a latent undercurrent of resistance. There are many who think play and learning to be mutually incompatible. While educational thinkers talk of play as the child's way of learning, there are many who feel that play is a 'waste of time.'

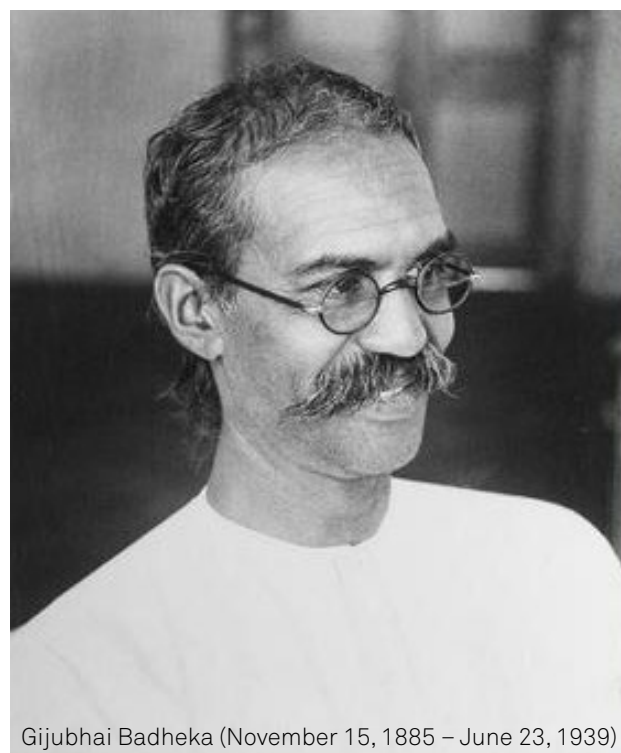
Attitudes towards play are shaped by social pedagogy traditions that are well-entrenched. Sustained exposure to a different way of thinking is needed to change mindsets. It is generally found that most European countries are more accepting of a holistic learning framework based on care, play and development of social-emotional competencies. Whereas, in Asian countries there seems to be a greater emphasis on school readiness and direct instruction even in the preschool years.

Context plays a role in shaping attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of teachers too, who

have the responsibility of implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. Prevalent among many teachers is a dichotomy between the role of child-led, child-initiated, free play activities, versus a teacher-led instruction-based play activities.

Most teachers believe that while free play is very good for developing social-emotional skills and communication skills, direct forms of instruction are needed for children to learn the basics of literacy and numeracy and other forms of more 'academic' learning. This belief also influences how much freedom a teacher will accord to children to manage their learning or whether at all any autonomy is to be given to them.

The other problem that is not much talked about while discussing the pros and cons of play-based learning is the need for an appropriate environment equipped with adequate play materials to facilitate play-based learning. Further, teachers who are expected to implement a play-based curriculum lack the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes to scaffold children's learning, while allowing them to follow their instincts, interests and abilities.



Gijubhai Badheka (November 15, 1885 – June 23, 1939)

Some of the ambivalence, doubt and uncertainty that we find in teachers today around play-based learning is also due to their lack of confidence in implementing a play-based pedagogy. Teachers feel that there is a contradiction between the principles of pedagogy laid down in policy documents and administrative expectations at the systemic level focussing on learning outcomes. The attitudes and beliefs of parents, too, put pressure on teachers as they are more focussed on academic learning and reluctant to accept the value of play.

Dichotomy around giving agency and freedom to the child

There is an interesting anecdote about a visitor to a Montessori school, who found the children busily engaged in different activities, talking freely to one another whereas the teacher's presence was hardly noticeable. Slightly disconcerted, the visitor asked one five-year-old girl 'so in your school you can *do what you like*,' to which the girl in all earnestness replied, 'No ma'am, here *we like what we do*'.

This small but significant encounter offers a very interesting insight into the idea of children taking charge of their learning, although it is a viewpoint that has been widely propagated by education thinkers all over the world. Thinkers like Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo and Krishnamurthy, all endorsed a liberating view of education, where play and freedom are central to realizing the inner potential of a child. Perhaps the urge of a captive nation striving to break free from the chains of foreign rule found resonance in education methods that accorded the learners the agency to explore, choose and take charge of their own learning. Such progressive educational ideas captured the imagination of the nation. Several high-quality early childhood learning centers and schools were established in India in the previous century.

Today the scenario has changed with the emergence of a market economy that

encourages competition and high scores. Although there are some lasting legacies of these great enterprises, and some preschool programs offered by NGOs and private philanthropies are of excellent quality, there has been a gradual formalization of preschool education all over. Even Tagore's own beloved school at Santiniketan has not been fully able to stick to his principle of giving abundant joy and freedom to children while being educated in the lap of nature.

The journey ahead

But all is not bleak. There are things that give us reason to be more optimistic and hopeful. NEP 2020 and NCF 2022 have both clearly mandated that the play-based pedagogy of early childhood education should travel upward. These documents recommend play-based pedagogy to be continued in the first two years of primary education. Thus, the trend of downward percolation of formal teaching to the pre-primary classes is sought to be reversed.

The policy directive has the potential to resolve the existing dichotomy. But it is only the first step and there is a long road ahead. Teachers would need intensive, recurrent and hands-on training to internalize the principles of play-based pedagogy. Other players in the educational ecosystem will also have to be trained to develop an understanding of the importance of play-based pedagogy and helped to overcome their own personal biases or prejudices. Early childhood centres should be equipped with adequate and appropriate play materials. And parents have to be educated and made aware. It is an uphill task but not an impossible one, as we are blessed with a rich tradition of quality early childhood education, from which we can draw and take inspiration from.

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Early childhood education in urban Anganwadis

Some concerns in the context of the FLN mission

Atul Gaikwad

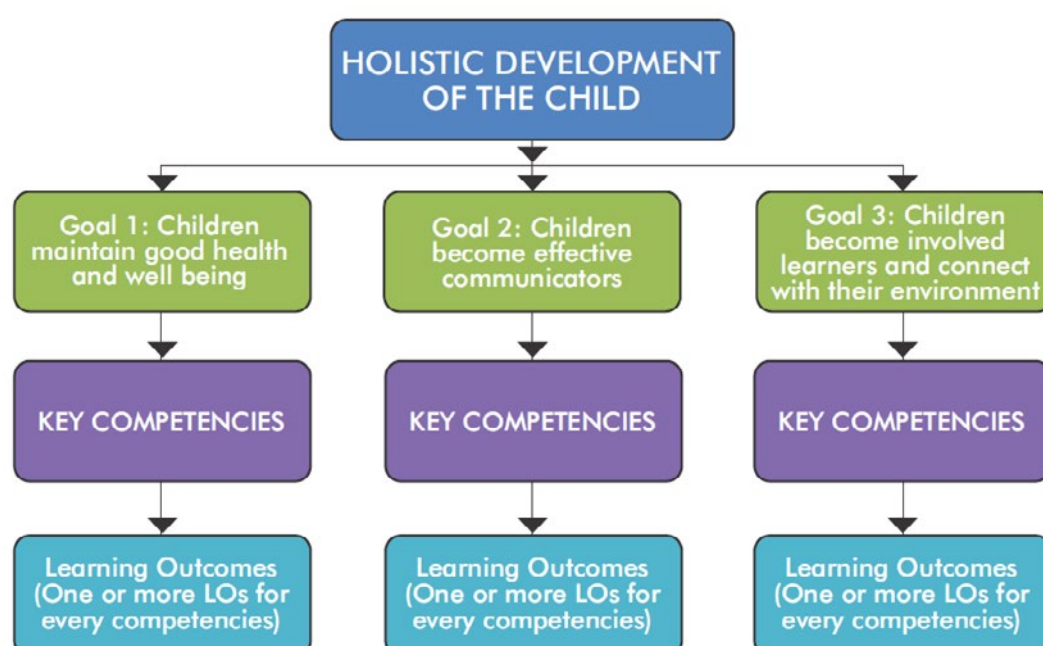
Scene 1: An Anganwadi teacher, in her small Anganwadi space, arranges children in semi-circular seating and is conducting a language development activity. Children are engrossed and looking at the teacher. Suddenly, one man enters the Anganwadi carrying a big container of Khichdi. He starts talking to the Anganwadi teacher, asking for the empty container. The Anganwadi teacher leaves the activity in between and hands over the empty container to the man. He pours the khichadi into the container and slides it into the middle of the Anganwadi. The noise of the sliding container and the smell of the khichadi spread all over the Anganwadi.

Scene 2: An Anganwadi teacher is conducting circle time activities. However, some parents seating at the back of the Anganwadi are busy in the mundane act of chatting.

Scene 3: There is a district-level meeting of teachers, kendra-pramukhs, and other officers, on preparing the implementation plan of the FLN mission. However, neither an Anganwadi teacher nor a supervisor is invited for the meeting.

Scene 4: An Anganwadi teacher is helping children to eat from their tiffin boxes. Suddenly one local person enters the Anganwadi asking the teacher about some documents. Anganwadi teacher asks that person to come again, once the ECE (Early Childhood Education) session gets over.

These can be day-to-day instances from any urban Anganwadi. The scenes mentioned above highlight our priorities as a society. Research from across the world on education, neuroscience and economics demonstrates clearly that ensuring free, accessible,



high-quality ECCE is perhaps the very best investment that any country can make for its future. Through Anganwadis, we have ensured in making ECCE services free and accessible to a great extent. However, are we doing enough? What are the issues that we must address?

NEP has given supreme importance to ECE. It has included ages 3 to 6 years in the foundational stage of education. It has also suggested the formation of a national-level mission - Nipun Bharat Mission (NBM) - on foundational literacy and numeracy. NBM takes the approach of competency-based teaching. It has three goals, each one focusing on a set of competencies. These competencies are acquired by the attainment of some learning outcomes (LOs).

The Nipun Bharat guidelines acknowledge the importance of ECE in achieving foundational literacy and numeracy at the end of grade 3. These guidelines state LOs for children in the age groups of 3-4, 4-5 and 5-6 in a detailed manner. Maharashtra already had a well thought out ECE curriculum (Aakar). However, NBM brings more clarity about the age-appropriate changes we all want to see in children.

In the upcoming years, with the launch of NBM, there is a high chance that the ECE space will have remarkable changes. Anganwadi teachers and helpers, along with the supervisors and officers, and NGO representatives, will witness this change. The process of adopting change will involve the capacity building of Anganwadi teachers and helpers through training and learning spaces. However, in addition to that, there are several complex issues and concerns that need attention. These issues are discussed underneath.

Convergence: Achieving foundational literacy and numeracy needs a lot of convergence with multiple departments, offices and ministries. This convergence is very difficult

to achieve if there is no plan and if the approach is not inclusive.

During our Anganwadi teacher training workshop, we found that 76% of Anganwadi teachers were unaware of NBM. Most of the Anganwadi supervisors, and child development project officers (CDPOs), are also not sure about the implementation of the mission. The foundational stage sees ages 3 to 8 as one continuum, where children learn in a certain way. Children from 3 to 6 years of age go to Anganwadis for preschool education. And those who are in the age group of 6 to 8 years go to primary schools.

Anganwadi centres in Maharashtra will be linked to the nearby primary schools, so that the latter can help Anganwadi teachers to achieve the desired outcome in early childhood education. However, this initiative does not make any sense in practical terms. The preschool teaching pedagogy is very different than that of the Anganwadis.

On the contrary, primary teachers should adopt the play-based, activity-based pedagogy practiced in Anganwadis, if they want to teach in the foundational stage in a true sense. The collaboration (without any superiority-inferiority complex) between Anganwadi teachers and primary teachers seems a very romantic idea. In cities, where there is a school with a pre-primary section located near the Anganwadi, this convergence becomes a bit complex.

The problem of inadequate space: ICDS is primarily a village scheme. In Maharashtra, there are around 1.1 lakh Anganwadis. Out of these, 14% Anganwadis (15,500 Anganwadis) are urban. These urban Anganwadis face a lot of challenges in terms of resources. Currently, BELIEF is working with 54 urban Anganwadis. Only 17% of these Anganwadis have some dedicated and lockable space. The rest of the Anganwadis run in a rented space that they can access only for three–four hours. There are often restrictions on the usage of electricity and wall space.

Most of these rented spaces are the living rooms of some families. These rooms have the furniture and other stuff of the house owner. Family members of the owner pass through these rooms while Anganwadi teachers conduct ECE sessions. Some Anganwadis run on a porch. Some others run in balconies or parking spaces as well. Is it possible for a teacher to follow the timetable suggested by the state curriculum while dealing with these challenges?

In cities, Anganwadis function hardly for two hours. And we cannot blame Anganwadi workers for this. There are deep-rooted societal and systemic issues that end up making ECE an activity done in a very casual manner with almost no priority given to it at all.

Services offered by Anganwadi centres

- Supplementary nutrition
- Immunization
- Healthcare check-ups
- Referral health services
- Non-formal pre-school education
- Nutrition and health education

Enrolment: BELIEF has observed that children receiving ECE services in Anganwadis belong to the most underprivileged backgrounds. Anganwadis are the biggest preschool service provider for children below 6 years of age. There is no centralized reliable data available for private preschools. These preschools might have a comparable share in terms of the number of children catered to.

Day by day, the number of children coming to Anganwadis is reducing. Designing ECE, particularly for children belonging to the 4 to 6 years age group, is very critical. However, this age group has the lowest enrolment rates in urban Anganwadis.

The mushrooming of low-fee private schools and aspiration for the English language has impacted the enrolment in Anganwadis. Only

parents who cannot afford the private school fees send their children to Anganwadis. The general bias that private schools are better than Anganwadis is observable even in Anganwadi teachers. Thus, attracting children to Anganwadis, and building parental trust that the Anganwadi is an important space for their child's future, are some of the important challenges that Anganwadi teachers face.

Systemic design: Anganwadis function under the ICDS program under the Department of Women and Child Development. They offer six services to the population in their jurisdiction. ECE ('non-formal education' as termed in ICDS scheme documents) is one of these services.

One teacher along with the helper is expected to cater to all these services to different beneficiary groups. Health and nutrition are always given prime importance and ECE takes the back seat.

Up till now, the design of the program, our national priorities, and our approach toward children in the early years have made everyone habitual to give less priority to ECE. The notion that, "It is okay if the child is not learning anything. He should come to the Anganwadi and have nutritious food," must change. We have to take a position and say that education is equally important and is a serious affair. The system should plan for and gather all the resources required for the successful implementation of the Aakar curriculum in each Anganwadi.

Academic support, monitoring and

evaluation: Anganwadi teachers mostly work in isolation. A supervisor is expected to monitor all the Anganwadis in a bit (cluster of around 25), and report to the ICDS' child development project officer (CDPO). However, many of the supervisor posts are vacant. Current supervisors are given the extra charge of one or two bits. Thus, the number of Anganwadis under one supervisor often becomes beyond their supervision capacity.

Anganwadis do not maintain any formative assessment of each child. Thus, a majority of academic decisions are taken either randomly or based on prior experience. The culture of data-driven analysis of the situation and taking informed decisions need to be inculcated to strengthen ECE in Anganwadis.

Anganwadi teachers gather every month for cluster (bit) meetings held by supervisors. These meetings are often held to collect data and perform other administrative tasks. The restructuring of the bit meetings and aligning them to the discussion on ECE will help build an academic support structure for Anganwadi teachers.

Conclusion: The quality of ECE has a lifelong impact on an individual's life. Anganwadis play a very significant role in ensuring a safe and dignified future for children from underprivileged backgrounds. Thus, improving the quality of ECE transacted in Anganwadis has a big social relevance.

Nipun Bharat Mission brings ECE to the forefront. The mission's goals are difficult

to translate into reality. However, it is not an impossible task. With political and administrative will, the concerns mentioned above can be easily addressed.

Involving parents in the process of ECE, leveraging technology to address issues, and creating a teacher support structure to ensure the continuous learning of teachers will definitely add value.

A focussed, systemic and planned intervention to address all the relevant issues related to ECE can help us advance in a positive direction.

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Understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young children and their parents

Neelima Gokhale

As the world slowly returns to normalcy following the Covid-19 pandemic, we are all trying to understand the extent of its impact on various aspects of our lives. We are aware of the physical and emotional trauma that many around us experienced. However, it is not always easy to gauge the impact of such events on very young children.

This is partly because they do not have the necessary skills and abilities to articulate their experience, and partly because the adults around them may not have the skills to notice and document the changes. Without a doubt, children will suffer both immediate and long-term effects.

There hasn't been enough time to conduct a systematic study of such effects on young children yet. However, here are some observations of a few experienced early childhood teachers. These teachers have been working in a semi-rural community in Maharashtra for more than a decade.

They are, therefore, familiar with the patterns of behavior of young children attending their balwadis, and their parents. Like everywhere else, there was a complete collapse of familiar school structure in this community for children, parents and teachers during the pandemic.

The teachers tried various ways of staying in touch with the children and their parents for over 18 months. However, very little consistency was a challenge.

The children have been back in balwadis for the first time since the beginning of this

school year (June 2022) after the 18-month long disruption. The teachers have noticed several changes in children's behavior and their parents' responses to the teachers' concerns and suggestions. Following are some of the most significant changes.

- Much greater separation anxiety both in children and parents
- Deterioration in punctuality and regular attendance
- Poor personal hygiene as well as care of personal belongings
- Less interest in active, physical play by many children
- Generally low energy at home and in classrooms
- Much shorter attention span in classroom activities
- Unwillingness to share
- Much less cooperation and collaboration with peers
- Ignoring classroom rules
- Lack of appropriate responses to given instructions
- Much greater absenteeism even for very minor health reasons
- Increased dependency on electronic devices

These are possible indicators of the impact of facing an unknown and unexpected event and social isolation. Although all the observed changes cannot be attributed to the pandemic, it certainly seems to have played a major role.

Enjoying rigorous outdoor play comes naturally to children. However, since families were forced to remain indoors for the fear of getting sick, they had to find different ways of engaging themselves. Electronic media has been the most commonly used substitute.

Although parents understood the negative impact of this change, they found themselves ill-prepared to find meaningful alternatives to engage children constructively. Now it seems, it might take a while to restore the good healthy habits of active outdoor play.

We know that physical activity is necessary for good physical and mental health. Lack of physical activity often leads to restless behavior in children and adults. This could be the underlying cause for a general low energy level, lack of sustained attention and other difficulties in the classroom environment.

Children learn social norms and rules of behavior through ongoing interactions with others. Some of the older preschoolers were fortunate to have had some schooling experience prior to the pandemic shutdown.

However, some didn't have any experience at all. Many young children missed out on valuable learning opportunities for a considerable period of time. Hence they experience greater difficulties in learning to share, collaborate, follow rules, etc.

The preschool teachers, whose experiences are shared here, are confident in sharing their observations because most of them are part of this community. They also have had more than a decade of teaching experience in early childhood settings.

They, therefore, know the families, the expected behavior from their children, and those of their children's teachers and the school. The teachers have found these behavioral changes in children and adults alarming.

These observations must be taken seriously, because there is irrefutable evidence that

a sound foundation of social and emotional security is essential for children's brain development as well as for their physical and emotional well-being throughout their lives. Entering a preschool is an important stage in the lives of young children.

As they step out into the wider social world, it is their first ongoing non-family social experience. They must learn to navigate the new challenges successfully. Therefore, acquiring self-help and communication skills becomes very important as these give them confidence when they face unfamiliar situations. The skills that help young children in a learning environment include the following.

- Learning to use the toilet appropriately
- Feeding themselves independently
- Letting teachers know when they need help
- Learning to follow classroom rules
- Responding to instructions and requests appropriately
- Following classroom routines
- Sharing toys
- Waiting for their turn
- Handling toys, books and other materials appropriately

This learning does not happen naturally. Parents have to coach their child to acquire these skills by acting as a model for them and expecting them to respond appropriately. They can engage in role play with their children to support such learning. Some examples of conversations parents can have with their children frequently before they enter the preschool follow:

"Let us practice being in school. I am the teacher, you want to go to the toilet, what do you do? Now, you be the teacher and tell me how to play with this toy."

"You are a big girl/ boy now. When you are in school, you have to use the toilet by yourself."

Can you show me how?" Or

"When you are in school, you have to share your toys with your friends. It is much more fun to play with friends." Or

"You must learn to take care of your things." Or

"Always ask your teachers for help. They will look after you when we are not there."

Parents should always speak to their children about the school and the teachers positively to help them begin to trust their teachers and feel safe in the new environment. Such thoughtful preparation before entering preschool alleviates the stress stemming from the unfamiliarity of this major experience.

Including parents in young children's learning is always beneficial for the children. However, the pandemic has highlighted the parents' need for social interactions with other parents as well as teachers. Just as young children learn much from their peers, so do adults in their lives.

Like their children, parents did not have opportunities to share their concerns with other parents or be reassured by them or the teachers. This made it harder for them to help children learn what they knew was important.

The parents have recognized the need to learn strategies and skills to engage with their children more constructively at home. This is a good opportunity for ECCE professionals to work more collaboratively with parents. Similarly, the teachers have understood the parent's need to learn more about their children's development and learning.

This offered a great opportunity for parents and teachers to work collaboratively on understanding how children learn and what can be done to support such learning. This group of teachers have come up with some

key information and strategies to share with the parents. They believe these will be helpful to children, parents and themselves.

It is important to help parents understand that at this stage (up to six years of age), learning the alphabet or numbers without understanding their usefulness is unhelpful. It may even be harmful to the children in the long run.

Instead, we can work on children acquiring more useful skills and abilities that will foster good learning habits that are essential for the later formal education. These are:

- Listening to instructions and responding to them appropriately (This indicates attention and comprehension)
- Working independently for sustained periods of time
- Completing a task in the given time
- Asking questions for clarity
- Sharing their thoughts and ideas with others
- Listening to others carefully

In preschool classrooms, children gain these skills through consistent routines and expectations of socially acceptable behavior. Children also learn much from their peers. Such learning is only possible the children have the freedom to work freely and independently.

In other words, children learn through active play within the framework of ground rules of the learning environment. This group of teachers have been using play as the primary learning tool in their classrooms for several years. They feel confident of its benefits to children and will try to inform parents of the same in a more proactive manner. They are planning to use the following strategies in the next academic year.

- More frequent meetings with parents in smaller groups rather than whole class groups so that they can have more meaningful conversations

- Encourage parents to spend at least one day in their child's classroom for non-participation observation. This should help them to get a better understanding of the classroom practices, teacher–children interactions, patterns of communication, as well as their own child's behavior.
- Encourage parents to share their concerns, to help them where possible, and support them to seek the right help.
- Explain to the parents of the significance of 'school readiness' for preschoolers as explained above, so that children can be helped to develop skills in a planned manner and feel confident in an unfamiliar environment.

Such efforts both by teachers and parents are needed to construct a trusting, safe and positive learning environment for children and their families, where mutual concerns can be shared and successes can be enjoyed. As we have learnt, social isolation can be very hard on children and adults. Working towards building a community that can face challenges together seems like the right

thing to do, which this group of teachers is committed to doing.

Dr Neelima Gokhale has a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Biology. In 1978, she completed a diploma in Early Childhood Education from Sofia Polytechnic, Mumbai. She has worked as a kindergarten Teacher in Mumbai, Hong Kong and Singapore for over 20 years.

While working in Singapore, she completed her BEd and PhD from the University of South Australia. She went on to work at a teacher education institution in Singapore before returning to India in 2008.

Since her return, she has been involved with in-service teacher education of Balwadi teachers at Pragat Shikshan Sanstha and Anand Niketan in Wardha, Maharashtra, and Bithur, Uttar Pradesh.

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Navigating the interplay of research and policy in ECCE

Dr Venita Kaul

Editorial Note: For the ECCE thematic issue of Samuhik Pahal, we wanted to explore for our readers, the intersections between research and policy with respect to how civil society organizations (CSOs) and schools can leverage the growing body of evidence from brain science and economics to align with India's policy focus on early years education, specifically Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), and how can they effectively conduct research within their own educational ecosystems to enhance the learning outcomes for young children. We feel privileged to have Dr Venita Kaul to address these issues over an interactive discussion. The following section is prepared based on an interview with her.

The interaction between research and policy in the field of ECCE in India is crucial. Research can play a critical role in influencing policy formulation and decision-making processes. The involvement of researchers in conducting studies that provide evidence can help shape policies that are grounded in reliable data and insights. For instance, Indian Early Childhood Education Impact Study (IECEI) contributed to the foundational stage recommendations in NEP 2020, highlighting the significant impact of research in policy discussions.

The following were five of the major recommendations in the study report: Include pre-primary education as an integral part of the Right to Education Act (2009); Ensure that children acquire the necessary school readiness competencies prior to moving to formal, academic learning; Design and implement a flexible play-based foundational curriculum for 3- to 8-year-

olds along an early learning continuum; Institute a regulatory system for early childhood education; Reach out to parents, communities, and other stakeholders to generate demand for developmentally appropriate early childhood education.

However, it is not enough to merely conduct research. Active advocacy efforts are also necessary to ensure that research findings reach policymakers and they in turn acknowledge and implement these effectively. The relationship between research and policy is also crucial for the effective implementation of evidence-based decisions.

CSOs along with the academic community need to come together and approach research collaboratively with curiosity and commitment to improve children's lives. They need to identify research gaps, determine what is known and unknown, and explore the level of detail required for their research. Another way to get engaged in policy and research is to provide feedback on policies and implementation. Monitoring how states interpret and act upon centrally laid down policies is important, especially for CSOs working in specific states for which multi-state research can be very beneficial.

Micro-level research by CSOs in their own backyards, organizations and schools, planned and designed collaboratively, could also be productive and beneficial, especially for exploring contextual and cultural variations and diversity with regard to implementation of any policy. CSOs in the ECCE domain should collaborate and identify critical research questions relevant to policy making. For instance, understanding

the status of early childhood education, the location of children, age-wise (whether they are in schools, preschools, or homes), participation trends, and the impact of ECCE on-school readiness are important research areas. Longitudinal research is particularly valuable for assessing long-term effects. Some of the essential areas of research are listed below.

- Evaluating the extent of adoption of policy recommendations by a particular state/district, such as play-based pedagogy, and understanding the challenges faced by teachers;
- Exploring the profiles of accepting and non-accepting teachers;
- Teacher education and curriculum development;
- Intersection of cultural and social dimensions;
- Assessing status of school readiness competencies across private schools and examining their understanding of their own role and response to ECCE policies.

CSOs and schools, with limited resources, can contribute to research by focusing on qualitative methodologies. By conducting case studies and comparative analysis, they can observe and document effective practices within their catchment areas. For instance, studying teachers' innovative approaches in implementing play-based pedagogy can provide valuable insights into needs for professional development and instructional practices. Similarly, exploring governance aspects and factors driving successful schools can inform the development of effective policies. Organizations and schools need to consider the diversity of contexts in which they operate. Different states may have varying baselines, priorities and implementation challenges. Comparative research across multiple states can provide a deeper understanding of how policies are interpreted and implemented differently. This knowledge

can guide advocacy efforts and tailor interventions to specific regional needs. Furthermore, considering cultural and social dimensions, as well as private sector involvement, are essential to address the diverse needs of children and families.

To sum up, the interactions between research and policy in the domain of ECCE is crucial for achieving positive development outcomes for children in India. Evidence-based recommendations have the potential to drive effective policy making and implementation. Organizations, schools, and CSOs can contribute to this process by conducting micro studies and qualitative research, identifying research gaps, and generating an understanding of local contexts. By bridging the gap between research and policy, stakeholders can work toward improving the lives of children and promoting quality early childhood care and education across the country through proactive collaboration and networks.

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NEP and developing programs for its effective implementation with special reference to ECCE

Sunisha Ahuja

Background

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is India's first education policy of the 21st century. It aims to address the many developmental priorities of the country. NEP has recommended the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, starting with a new curricular structure that brings into its fold three years of pre-school education or early childhood education, by replacing the earlier 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4.

The first five-years of schooling, referred to as the foundational stage, include three-years of early childhood care and education (ECCE). NEP 2020 acknowledges that in this stage of schooling there should be a smooth transition for children from pre-school to early primary grades by ensuring that the curriculum is a continuum for children from age 3 to 8-years.

The policy lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of everyone. It emphasizes that education must develop cognitive capacities, including 'foundational capacities of literacy and numeracy,' and higher-order cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving. In addition, it also focuses on social, ethical and emotional capacities and dispositions.

NEP 2020 commits to ensure universal access to high quality ECCE across the country in a phased manner. It recommends Anganwadi centres and pre-primary sections

in schools as platforms for delivering ECE within the government system.

Even earlier there have been efforts to institutionalize ECCE. NEP 1986 viewed ECCE as an important input in the strategy of human development and committed the state to give more attention to existing mechanisms of ECCE delivery. In 2013, Ministry of Women and Child Development passed the ECCE policy to be implemented through the wide network of Anganwadi centres.

In the last two decades, there have been legislative efforts that have put the spotlight on the need for and importance of early childhood education. In 2002, the government passed the 86th Constitutional Amendment, comprising two insertions: Article 21-A which made the Right to Education (RTE) of a child between six to 14 years, a fundamental right; and Article 51A(k) that assigned the 'fundamental duty' of educating a child to their parent or guardian.

Additionally, the old Article 45 was substituted by a new one through the same Constitutional Amendment, which introduced the concept of ECCE. It provided for a directive to the State, whereby the State was at liberty to pass legislation to bring into effect the mandate of providing ECCE to children up to six years of age.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (or the RTE Act) was enacted with the primary objective to reiterate the aim of Article 21 of the

Constitution. Section 11 of this Act gives legislative mandate to the respective Central and State governments to provide three years of ECCE to children below the age of 6 years, so that they enter schools with readiness for a more formal curricular transaction.

Vision for ECCE in NEP 2020 and its implication for programming in the states

The vision for ECCE programs, as mentioned in NEP 2020, is for children to attain optimal outcomes in the domains of physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy and numeracy.

Further the policy recommends that, “For universal access to ECCE, Anganwadi Centres will be strengthened with high-quality infrastructure, play equipment, and well-trained Anganwadi workers/teachers. Every Anganwadi will have a well-ventilated, well-designed, child-friendly and well-constructed building with an enriched learning environment.”

Children in Anganwadi Centres shall take activity-filled tours - and meet the teachers and students of their local primary schools, in order to make the transition from Anganwadi Centres to primary schools a smooth one. Anganwadis shall be fully integrated into school complexes/clusters, and Anganwadi children, parents, and teachers will be invited to attend and participate in school/school complex programs and vice versa.”

Recognizing the need for high quality professionally qualified adults to work with young children, NEP 2020 also recommends for courses for capacity building of existing human resource. A major departure was made by NEP 2020 from the existing National ECCE Policy 2013, by stating that the responsibility for ECCE curriculum and pedagogy would lie with the Ministry of Education to ensure its continuity from pre-primary school through

primary school, and to ensure due attention to the foundational aspects of education.

The policy went on to state that the planning and implementation of the ECCE curriculum would be carried out by all relevant ministries implementing ECCE programs through their service delivery platforms, i.e., Anganwadi centres and pre-primary sections in schools.

Several states have taken the lead in translating the vision for ECCE as mentioned in NEP 2020. Coordination mechanisms have been established at the highest level of the administration between the Departments of Women and Child Development and School Education. Comprehensive five-year perspective plans have been developed through a consultative process to improve infrastructure of Anganwadi centres.

Review of existing ECCE curriculum in the states is being led by the Department of School Education. Learning materials for young children are being aligned to the goals of the National Mission for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. Teams of resource persons and master trainers, with representation from both the departments are being formed at the district level to lead the capacity building programs for Anganwadi workers and schoolteachers. Online courses have been rolled out for the capacity building of Anganwadi workers. These focus on various programmatic aspects of ECCE.

Anganwadi workers and teachers are attending joint workshops. The goal is to help build trust, respect and empathy toward each other. Guidance has been developed for the engagement between Anganwadi centres and schools when Anganwadi centres are located within the school premises.

Many of these efforts of the state governments have been facilitated and supported by civil society organizations, through workshops, seminars, field visits and consultations with ECCE experts and academia. This is an ongoing exercise, as

more and more guidance continues to be released from the national level. These discussions in the states are also leading to several innovative models of strengthening ECCE services at the Anganwadi centres.

States are setting up quality standards for service delivery, establishing norms for number of hours of daily program. They are also reaching out to communities to generate awareness on the need for and importance of play-based learning for young children. Efforts are being made to rebrand Anganwadi centres as learning centres through a recently launched campaign *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi*.

Some states are proposing to add an additional worker to the Anganwadi centre who would be only responsible for the ECCE program. In some states, teachers teaching in grade 1 and 2 are being asked to support Anganwadi workers in conducting pre-literacy and numeracy activities with 5-year-olds in the Anganwadi centre or be mentors and coaches for Anganwadi workers. In several states, the Department of School Education has taken the lead in revising the existing ECCE curriculum through the SCERT. Many of these workshops are being attended by representatives from both School Education and Women and Child Development Departments.

All the recommendations of NEP 2020 are aligned to the developmental needs of children. However, some operational challenges have been identified while implementing these recommendations as it requires coordination and collaboration between different ministries and departments of the government at all levels of administration.

Support for ECCE program in Anganwadi centres and pre-primary sections of government schools

Provision of quality ECCE service to young children is on the concurrent list of the



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constitution. Both the Centre and the States can legislate on the subject. Both the Centre and the States have a legislative responsibility to define the quality standards for the services and provide the adequate funding required for implementing these.

Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Education at the national level, and their line departments in the States, are responsible for ensuring that all children 3-6-year-old have access to quality services through Anganwadi centres or pre-primary sections of schools.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development, through its centrally-sponsored Mission Saksham Anganwadi, includes ECCE for children 3-6-year-old as one of the three primary program verticals, focusing on strengthening the early learning component of Anganwadi services, essential for children to achieve their full human potential. It is being implemented through the State Governments/ UT administrations,



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based on a cost-sharing ratio between the Central and State Governments. For ECCE program, Rs.3,000/- per Anganwadi centre once in 5 year and Rs. 1,000/- per Anganwadi centre per annum for four years has been provisioned. The ECCE program is supposed to be delivered by a multi-tasked Anganwadi worker supported by a helper, who are both paid a monthly honorarium. This amount varies across states with a minimum of Rs 4,500 per month to Rs 20,000 per month in some states/UTs.

The Ministry of Education, under its centrally-sponsored program Samagra Shiksha, has made provision for supporting ECCE in pre-primary sections of government schools. Implemented by states governments /UT administrations, the financial investment is on a cost sharing basis. The components included under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan are as follows.

- A grant of Rs 2 lakhs per annum to cover the cost of human resource, teaching-learning materials per school per annum.
- Provision of up to Rs. 500 per child for teaching-learning materials, indigenous toys and games, play-based activities per annum for pre-primary sections in government schools.
- A non-recurring grant (one in five-years) of up to Rs.1 lakh per school, for infrastructure improvement for including child friendly furniture, outdoor play materials, etc. for pre-primary sections in government schools and Anganwadi centres located within school premises.

Challenges that need to be addressed

Across the departments that are planning and implementing ECCE programs, there needs to be a common understanding that within a state there must be one common core curriculum for ECCE. While the School Education Department has the responsibility for developing the state ECCE curriculum, in many states the department has previously not implemented ECCE, as there were no pre-primary sections in schools.

On the other hand, the Department of Women and Child Development, after the release of the National ECCE Policy 2013, with support from several CSOs has designed and implemented a comprehensive ECCE curriculum. An effective leadership from both the departments needs to ensure that any efforts towards strengthening the ECCE program across implementation modalities must be done adopting a consultative approach involving all stakeholders.

Another area of concern that has emerged in some states in the development of the core ECCE curriculum is the downward shifting of learning expectations from children. This downward shifting of curriculum must be discouraged.

Efforts should be made toward sensitizing teachers and teacher educators to adopt play-based teaching-learning practices adopted in ECCE programs to be the approach in early primary grades. This will ensure continuity in the pedagogical approach across the foundational stage.

A major requirement in implementing NEP 2020's vision for ECCE is the need for a professional cadre for the ECCE workforce. The number of teacher education institutions offering programs preparing teachers for preschool is extremely low.

Only 1% of teacher education institutions in the private space (which comprise 92% of teacher education institutions in the country) offer programs for preschool teachers. None of the north-eastern states have teacher education programs for preschool.

In the case of the Anganwadi centres, the multitasked Anganwadi worker is expected to perform a wide variety of functions. There has not been sufficient investment in her professional development to deliver quality ECCE.

The Anganwadi system constitute the largest platform for implementing ECCE programs

through its 13.9 lakh centres. There are around 1.88 lakh government primary schools with pre-primary sections, a number that has been increasing in the last few years. However, both the departments have diverse institutional ecosystems to support program delivery.

This includes supplies and infrastructure for education, institutional support for professional development and last but not the least, huge variation in financial investment. Coordination and collaboration between the two departments could lead to optimum utilization of the financial resources available currently, while continuous efforts are needed to enhance investment in programs for young children.

NEP 2020 is aspirational and directional. To meet the vision and goal of this policy, all stakeholders including government departments, civil society organizations, academia, elected representatives and the private sector need to come together for the common vision of giving young children in our country a good start in life to build strong foundations for all future learning.

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In her role, she provides technical support to the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Education. Sunisha has been working in the education sector for three decades. During this time, she has worked with several national and international civil society organizations.

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Holistic development and assessment in early childhood education

A comprehensive perspective

Umamaheswara Rao Jaggena and Kinnari Pandya

It is a lively village Anganwadi classroom, a group of children gathered on a colourful rug for a delightful session of free play. The room buzzed with excitement as each child embarked on their chosen activities. Omar, focused and determined, while Chanti sitting beside and carefully piecing together a 'bus puzzle,' their eyes sparkling with accomplishment as the final piece found its place. Nearby, Bannu, constructed a magnificent aircraft using bristle-shaped blocks, his imagination soaring with every added detail, whereas Sanjana is just watching him, while she failed to construct any form. Meanwhile, Mani has showcased his skills in joining the boxes looking like a train trolley.

In this magical free play session, the children's creativity, problem-solving abilities, and love for stories intertwined, creating a vibrant environment of joy and exploration. The classroom rug became a hub of learning, imagination, and shared experiences, nurturing the holistic development of each child. This could be an 'anecdote' for an observer or a teacher to understand a group of children or a specific child's socio-emotional level by their social participation in play. Such anecdotes are one of the key records in understanding the development of the child in any aspect, and the progression or change in skills over a period of time. This is a snapshot of an authentic assessment process, having a great potential to draw conclusions about children's learning and development together with information derived from other sources.

What the early childhood period is like

The early childhood period is the most crucial period for the growth and development of the child. It needs the utmost attention and care. The developing child undergoes significant changes and growth in various aspects including physical, cognitive, social, linguistic and emotional development. These are considered domains of development that are evidenced in gradual process of change and differentiation from a simple to a more complex level. Development takes place in a predictable manner and all children follow a similar sequence of development but at their own rate.

Understanding what children are like at different stages of development is crucial for providing appropriate scaffolds and inputs to support their optimal holistic development. Learning and development are multidimensional and cumulative. Related processes are influenced by individual, social, cultural, and contextual factors and variations.

Why we need an ECE curriculum

Early childhood curriculum is essential to provide developmentally appropriate, organized and well-rounded learning experiences for young children. An early childhood curriculum promotes the holistic development of children by addressing their physical, cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic domains. It ensures a balanced emphasis on different areas of development and encourages integrated learning

experiences that foster overall growth. It provides a structured framework that ensures continuity and progression in children's learning experiences. It outlines a sequence of skills, concepts and content to be covered. It enables educators to plan and track children's progress systematically.

An early childhood curriculum establishes clear learning outcomes and goals for children. It specifies what children should know and be able to do at different stages of their development. These goals guide educators in designing meaningful learning experiences and assessing children's progress. It is essential to track the developmental and learning process in a continuous manner, which is a challenging task. Teachers and schools often assess the skills and competencies that are required for the next level of the formal education process, which is not very relevant for the learning and development of children in the early years

Assessment in ECE

Assessment in the early years refers to the process of gathering information about a child's development and learning, typically from birth to around the age of eight. The purpose of assessment in the early years serves several important purposes. These include helping educators, parent and caregivers understand and monitor a child's development across various domains.

Such assessments can also provide insights into the child's strengths, areas of growth, and individual learning styles. This assessment data assists educators in planning and tailoring instruction to meet each child's unique needs. Assessment supports the identification of children who may require additional support or intervention. It helps identify developmental delays, learning disabilities, or other specific needs. It, therefore, enables early intervention and targeted support to be implemented.

Assessment at the school or teacher level in early years

The focus of assessment in early years at the school or class level is often on observing and documenting children's behavior, interactions, participation in activities, and changes in naturalistic settings. It may involve a combination of formal and informal assessment methods, such as observations, checklists, portfolios, anecdotal records, and interviewing parents.

The emphasis is on gathering comprehensive and holistic information about a child's development, progress and learning experiences. It also leads to identifying areas where a child may require additional support, educators to take informed decisions to provide appropriate learning experiences and adjust their teaching strategies.

Mostly it emphasizes qualitative judgments at the child level. It also provides an opportunity for educators and parents to collaborate and share information about a child's progress.

Assessment at the level of programs and systems

Assessment data can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programs and interventions. It helps assess the impact of curriculum, teaching methodologies, and interventions on children's development and learning outcomes. System-level assessment involves assessing early childhood education at a broader scale, such as at the regional, national, or state level. Its purpose is to evaluate the overall quality, effectiveness, and impact of early childhood education systems and policies.

Both program-level and system-level assessments are important for ensuring high-quality early childhood education. Program-level assessments provide valuable information for individual programs to understand and support children's learning

and development within their specific context. System-level assessments provide a broader perspective and help inform policy decisions and initiatives that can improve the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood education across multiple programs and settings.

Ideally, program-level and system-level assessments should work together in a complementary manner. Program-level assessments contribute to the data used in system-level assessments, providing insights into the effectiveness of different programs, and help in developing a comprehensive understanding of early childhood education. Conversely, system-level assessments can inform program-level improvements by identifying effective practices, identifying areas for professional development, and promoting collaboration among programs to enhance overall outcomes for children.

Our experience of assessment in ECE at the program level

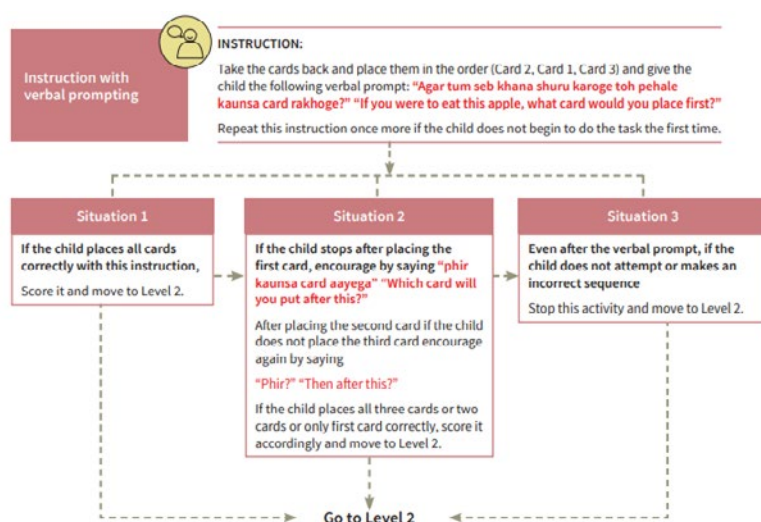
Azim Premji Foundation (APF) works towards improving the public education system in India. In one of the districts in the state of Telangana, APF has been trying out various interventions in the Early Childhood Education domain. It supports the public preschool program - the Integrated Child

Development Services (ICDS) scheme - in providing quality preschool education.

The intervention supports Anganwadi teachers to create a stimulating learning environment, transact quality curriculum using appropriate pedagogic strategies, and build positive relationships with the community. This initiative has resulted in building a good knowledge base in the ECE domain specific to teacher professional development in multi-modal engagement and curricular resources. The overall goal is to cater to the developmental and early learning needs of children in the age group of 3 to 6 years in 1,500 Anganwadi centres.

Over a period, we created effective tools and processes to evaluate the stimulative learning environment, teacher skills, knowledge and dispositions. Assessing young children and their progress, while they are going through the program, remained a challenge. It is necessary to capture information about children's current level of development and evaluate the impact of the programmatic intervention. Assessing children will support in designing a curriculum that uses the children's present level of performance as the base to help them progress towards their developmental potential.

Sample: ITEM 10 – Cognitive Domain – Sequential thinking ability – INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE Task



Leve 1 Task – 3 cards



Leve 2 Task – 4 cards



The genesis of the Early Learner Assessment (ELA) tool

The team reviewed all the available ECE assessment tools and found certain limitations. They did not meet our needs in terms of capturing the holistic development of young children. To fulfil our purpose, a new tool was developed with three key decisions in place.

First, develop a comprehensive and performance-based assessment tool to measure all major developmental domains. Second, to review standards from other countries and adapt them to the Indian context with input from field experts. This would serve as a guide for creating a developmental conceptual framework for assessment. Finally, the assessment should incorporate progressive levels of development instead of relying solely on age.

The significant nature of the Early Learner Assessment (ELA) tool

The Early Learner Assessment (ELA) tool is a comprehensive and culturally sensitive instrument specifically designed for monitoring the developmental progress of young children in rural and semi-urban areas of India, starting from 3 years of age and continuing beyond the age of 5. This tool encompasses all crucial aspects of development, including physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, creative, and aesthetic expression. It is culturally suitable, as it is tailored to the developmental standards of Indian children, with its items, language, materials, pictures and examples, adapted to the Anganwadi setting.

The tasks within the ELA tool are primarily based on observation, performance and interactive engagement, both at the individual child level and within natural group settings. This tool allows for the collection of both cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Thus, it enables the assessment of children's current developmental levels and their

ELA tool handbook

For copies of the ELA Tool Handbook you can visit [our website](#). You will need to fill a form following which a hard copy of the handbook will be sent to you.

progress throughout the preschool period. Its approach is performance-based, encouraging the active participation of children as they interact with assessors and/or materials to complete assigned tasks.

To ensure its effectiveness, the ELA tool underwent extensive field testing and a rigorous iterative process, involving collaborations with academic and field experts. From the initial conceptualization to its large-scale implementation, continuous refinement was undertaken to enhance the tool's precision and reliability.

Our insights and learnings from the ELA tool

The results from the ELA tool on children's development are consistent over the 5-year assessment process. Additionally, the assessment using this tool generated valuable and consistent data on the children's progress. The items and tasks align with the new NCF FS Stage Curriculum Framework, encompassing all 13 goals and competencies. Detailed rubrics are outlined to mark finer developmental progression within each task and for each child. These rubrics differentiate between the inability to perform a task, performing a task with additional help, and performing a task independently.

They provide insightful information for understanding qualitative development. The qualitative analysis of level-specific data helps us track individual children's progression and understand their development in a graded manner for a specific sub-domain. It allows us to determine the number of children at the emerging, developing, proficient and advanced levels of development.

The tool provides a clear picture of children's progress at specific domain levels. Quantifying this data yields valuable insights into the overall progression between control and experimental centres.

The inferences drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data facilitated a revision of our capacity-building programs with Anganwadi teachers. We revised our modules based on these insights. The data also enabled us to differentiate the engaged centres and identify teachers' potentialities, facilitating a customized input process.

In conclusion

Within the Early Childhood domain, it is crucial for any curriculum approach to embrace a holistic development perspective. It has to integrate play-based and activity-based methods and place a strong emphasis on the cultivation of essential life skills. The curriculum must be meticulously designed to address the developmental stages of each age group. It has to also align the learning process with the unique needs, interests, abilities and social context of every child.

Additionally, assessment, as an integral component of ECCE programs, plays a pivotal role in upholding a child-centric approach. It does this by ensuring that experiences and activities are planned in a manner that is developmentally appropriate. It is vital to continually explore and conduct research to create assessment processes that are both developmentally appropriate and contextually relevant, to meet the ever-growing needs of young learners.

Umamaheswara Rao Jaggena, brings forth an extensive experience of over 16 years in the Education sector, in which 9 years of experience in the domain of ECE. Holding a master's degree in Education from the NCERT (RIE Mysuru), he has held diverse roles including that of an academic leadership,

mentor, curriculum developer and program manager.

With a profound understanding of early childhood education, Umamaheswara Rao excels in crafting and implementing programs aimed at enhancing the quality of ECCE within Anganwadi centres. He possesses a wealth of experience in areas such as research, training, capacity building and developing frameworks such as teacher professional development, curriculum and assessment frameworks. Notably, he has played a pivotal role in the development of the NCF-Foundation stage Curriculum Framework, the creation of 'Jadui Pitara' ECE resources for NCERT, and Early Learning Assessment Tool (ELA Tool) and the transformation of ECE programs in Puducherry (UT). He can be reached at umamaheswara@azimpremjiifoundation.org

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Pathways to make ECE in India inclusive and equitable for children with disabilities

Seema Nath

Early childhood education (ECE) is imperative to make primary, secondary and tertiary education inclusive and equitable for children with disabilities. Inclusion in education needs to take an intersectional approach to identify and break down barriers.

These include attitudinal, physical, social, emotional and academic barriers. Such an approach is also needed to increase meaningful participation of all children in the education system.

This emphasis on inclusion and equity in ECE has been reiterated several times in National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020). It highlights the need for a strong base for ECCE Early Childhood Care and Learning from ages 3-6 years, with the aim of promoting overall learning, development and well-being.

The National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat Mission) emphasizes the following developmental goals: Children maintain good health and well-being; Children become effective communicators; Children become involved learners and connect with their immediate environment.

These developmental goals for children are further articulated in National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum Framework that has emerged from NEP 2020.

This reflects a strong focus on child development, well-being and engagement for learning. This framework moves away

from traditional models focused on academic outcomes.

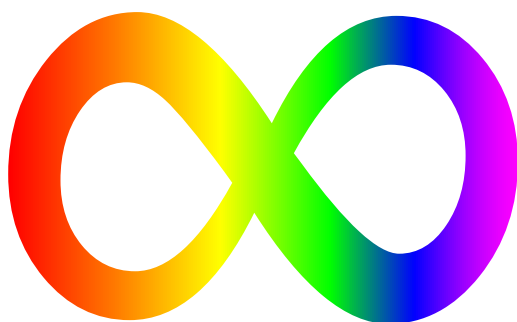
Both children with and without disabilities benefit from having an equitable and inclusive structure of education where their developmental, social, emotional and educational needs are met. Inclusion is not possible for one group at a time. Rather, we need to adopt the inclusion and equity lens for all students to set them up for success.

This understanding seems to be embedded in the recent Indian education landscape as evidenced in NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat, ECCE Curricular Framework, teacher trainings, etc. Reflecting specifically in the sphere of early childhood education, three essential factors stand out that can possibly provide a pathway to make early childhood education in India more inclusive and equitable for children with disabilities.

Examining existing systems and processes

It is important to examine existing systems and processes to understand where we stand. This is essential for us to be able to re-look at resources, training, knowledge and skills that will be required to achieve the desired outcomes as laid down in our policy documents for inclusive ECE and plan for it. This has been identified in NEP 2020.

It is important to implement its recommendations regarding strengthening early childhood institutions. These consist of stand-alone Anganwadis, Anganwadis co-located within primary schools, pre-primary sections located within primary sections



The rainbow-colored infinity symbol represents the diversity of the autism spectrum and the greater neurodiversity movement

covering at least till 5 or 6 years of age, and stand-alone pre-schools. However, we must also examine the readiness of these institutions to provide inclusive ECE.

[NCERT's Index for Inclusive Schools](#) aims to facilitate schools to welcome and respect diversity and helps to reflect on restructuring school culture, policies and practices for facilitating participation of all students in education, including those with disabilities. Such guidelines can be helpful in ECE as well.

As the ECE curricular framework rightly points out, the defining features of inclusive ECE remain access, participation and support. Hence it is important to examine the current ECE structures and institutions around these three parameters.

This also helps in adding to, and building on, existing systems to strengthen them, instead of starting a completely new system. We have a huge workforce of Anganwadi workers and ECE educators and institutions and these valuable resources need to be harnessed.

At Ummeed Child Development Center, we often talk about the need to 'change the system' and to refrain from trying to change the child to fit the system. This perspective also echoes in many policy documents. Hence, it becomes pertinent to examine the readiness of the system to include the child in ECE and prepare for inclusion.

Planning for inclusive early childhood education

The next step involves planning for inclusive ECE. Here an important consideration is adopting an intersectional lens for inclusive ECE and developing an understanding that different identities of class, caste, gender, disability, etc., intersect. We cannot plan for inclusion of one group at a time. Rather, we have to take an intersectional approach while planning for inclusive ECE.

The Indian education system adopts a rights-based approach to education. All children, with or without disabilities, enjoy rights to equitable and quality education. Thus, the starting point of planning for inclusive ECE is to know that it is the right of every child and adopt it as a core component of the planning process.

To plan for inclusive ECE, it is important to espouse a strength-based approach where a child's strengths are in the forefront. The starting point is always 'What the child can do,' instead of adopting a deficit lens of 'What the child cannot do.'

Adopting a strength-based approach is the cornerstone in any plan for the inclusion and support of all children who we provide services to at Ummeed Child Development Center. This helps to build upon the strengths of the child and aids them in forging ahead. We need to plan for the following.

Support early identification and create robust systems that can provide early support:

There is a vast body of literature that supports the notion that early identification of disabilities is crucial to mitigate challenges that a person with disabilities might face.

However, an equally important factor that accompanies early identification of disabilities and developmental delays is subsequently providing early support and access to services and accessibility of the environment and resources (physical, social,

emotional and academic). Hence, while planning for inclusive ECE, it is important to ensure that support structures and service provisions are available post-identification.

Training of early childhood educators on inclusive teaching and learning and building reflexivity: Another important factor is investing in building capacity of the Anganwadi workers and ECE educators, so that they are able to provide inclusive education from the early years. While there is a lot of emphasis on training, it must also take into account the needs of the diverse learners that enter the education system.

The ECE curriculum must be flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based and inquiry-based. It should also be able to respond to the needs of diverse students and be modifiable. ECE educators should be able to adapt it as per the needs of their pupils.

For this, the ECE educator should be trained to adopt a reflexive approach. A crucial understanding that underpins inclusive teaching and learning is that it is nothing more than just good teaching and learning practices that has reflexivity of the teacher. This enables them to draw on their existing knowledge and experience to provide the best learning environment to the diversity of students they encounter.

Making the system responsive: Another important thing to consider while planning for inclusive ECE is to build inclusion into all its aspects. These include physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy and numeracy.

What I mean by this is that we need to build systems that are proactive and responsive to the needs of diverse learners right from the start, instead of being reactive to the needs of diverse learners on a needs basis. While I acknowledge that some needs will need to be

addressed on an ongoing basis, we need to be prepared to respond to a diversity of learners.

At Ummeed, we have drawn on the Universal Design for Learning approach. Through this, we try to ensure that systems and process including teaching and learning are responsive to the needs of diverse learners.

Partnering with parents, caregivers and community members: Adopting a family-centred care approach has been an important part of Ummeed's philosophy. It honours the strengths, cultures, traditions and expertise of the families.

This helps to build a collaborative approach between the families and the professionals. Partnering with families, caregivers and community members is important toward building an inclusive community that works together to further inclusive ECE.

Sensitizing parents and caregivers on the early care and support that is available, partnering with them for ECE, etc., can help to strengthen communication and support between ECE educators and the former. Partnering with parents, caregivers and community members makes space for accountability.

It also ensures that parents and community members are invested and feel an integral part of their child's learning and development journey. This kind of collaboration is essential for sustaining inclusive ECE.

While reflecting on the pathways to inclusive ECE, it is important to consider it as an ongoing process. Inclusion is an ever-evolving goal that requires us to engage with it both conceptually and in action. This is essential to ensure feelings of belongingness with peers, teachers, and the community.

It also helps to ensure that the rights to quality and equitable education are upheld and students' well-being is kept in the forefront as the main outcome.

This essay has taken a systems approach. The goal has been to reflect on certain pathways that can pave the way for inclusive ECE for children with disabilities.

However, it must be acknowledged that this is not a linear pathway. We need to adopt a long-term vision. We also must continue evaluating our processes and practices to ensure that we are providing inclusive ECE.

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Capacity building of Anganwadi teachers in Telangana

M Sreenivasa Rao and Sujatha Raavi

ECCE in India and ICDS

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is considered one of the best investments a country can make to promote lifelong learning opportunities and prevent later remedial interventions. India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme is the world's most extensive childcare program started in 1975. The service addresses the needs of children, adolescent girls, and women from disadvantaged communities.

ICDS currently caters to more than 71.22 million children below six years of age and 14.83 million pregnant and nursing mothers. It operates through 13.87 lakh Anganwadi and Mini-Anganwadi centers across India. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is one of the six services of ICDS that is provided

to three- to six-year-old children through Anganwadi Centres (AWC) managed by Anganwadi Teachers (AWT) and Anganwadi Helpers (AWH). The primary purpose of ECE is to prepare a child physically, emotionally, socially, linguistically and cognitively for formal schooling.

Capacity building of Anganwadi teachers for effective ECCE

In this article, we will discuss the current scenario of AWT capacity building in India, the challenges AWTs face, the importance of AWT capacity building, and the initiatives taken by Azim Premji Foundation (APF) to address the gaps in capacity building efforts.

APF has been working in the field of school education since 2001 to improve quality of education. The foundation recognizes



A rally by school students, NSS volunteers and Anganwadi workers in a Public Information Campaign, organized by the PIB in Nedumangad, Thiruvananthapuram

that quality ECCE positively contributes to children's long-term development and learning.

Anganwadi Centers are the basic unit of childcare and service at the village level. These form a critical link between the community and child development and women's welfare services assisted by a helper. The AWT is a community-based frontline honorary worker selected by the district-level committee for implementing ICDS services. The efficacy with which they discharge their responsibilities depends mainly on their training.

National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) provides a 30-day job training course (JTC) to Anganwadi teachers through Anganwadi Training Centers (AWTCs), out of which only four days are spent on early childhood education. During the in-service period, a seven-day refresher training with emphasis on health and nutrition, and record maintenance is conducted. It has a less than adequate focus on education.

The duration, frequency and connectivity between the workshops and support in implementing the learnings are the key hindrances to the capacity building of AWT in ECE. AWTs need to be more adequately prepared as ECE teachers, so that they can better engage with children. This became evident from a study conducted in Telangana's Sangareddy district in 2014.

APF's Sangareddy ECE initiative

The Sangareddy ECE initiative, launched in 2014 in collaboration with the state government, was the foundation's first foray into the ECE domain. It aimed to transform AWCs into vibrant learning centers for children aged three to six years old and enhance their prominence as educational institutions. The foundation believes that well-trained Anganwadi teachers (AWTs), capable of planning and implementing developmentally and culturally appropriate

curriculum, are key to delivering high-quality ECE.

To address the gaps in capacity building efforts, APF introduced a multi-model training approach for AWTs and helpers at 40 AWCs. This approach includes quarterly workshops, sector meetings and onsite support. The workshops enhance teachers' understanding of ECE, the physical environment, and the community's role in child development. Sector meetings provide an opportunity for discussions, demonstrations, and hands-on experience in monthly curricular activities. The foundation's team also provides onsite support, actively observing and giving feedback to build AWTs' confidence in engaging with children.

In Phase I, the foundation conducted quarterly three-day workshops to enhance teachers' understanding of ECE, the physical environment, and the community's role in child development. Teachers also participated in brief two-hour engagements in selected projects during sector and project meetings. However, it was observed that teachers faced challenges in effectively applying the workshop learnings in Anganwadis.

The current capacity building program has evolved and is well-regarded by teachers and functionaries. The foundation's team closely monitors the impact of training in classrooms during their visits to AWCs. Additionally, a full-day workshop (five hours) at the sector level is conducted, facilitated by an APF resource person in the presence of a supervisor.

The foundation developed a set of teaching practices to establish a model Anganwadi center. They were designed to address the teachers' needs and fulfill gaps in current teaching practices, and were based on our experiences, observations and interactions with teachers and other stakeholders.

The first set of modules sought to improve skills to implement a minimum basic

Improving AWCs' effectiveness: what the stakeholders say

"Children who attended a quality program in an AWC for more than a year adjust well to the primary school system. They display better social, language and cognitive skills compared to children in the same class who have joined without experience of AWC." - Primary school teacher

"Regular refresher training does enhance our abilities and skills. Earlier, I could conduct a few activities such as songs, conversation, good habits and games to some extent. After getting support for my capacity building efforts through workshops, I have understood that environment, materials, approach, and surroundings also greatly impact a child's thinking and learning. Now I can confidently engage with children independently." – AWT

"Orientation on the importance of safe, secure and hygienic practices and the role of helpers in ECE helped me ensure clean and safe surroundings in and around the center. Parents recognized this, which made me happy." – AWH

"Earlier, I have seen children in AWC singing songs and writing the alphabets and numbers on slates. Now, after attending ECCE Days regularly, I have come to know that many other activities are undertaken by teachers and their importance for children's development. I am happy to send my child to the AWC daily." - Parent

program that covers play, conversations, songs/rhymes, stories, and art activities, along with setting up a learning-supportive environment. The second set of modules was designed to give an in-depth understanding of child development through detailed practice and content-based sessions focusing on emergent literacy, concepts and pre-numeracy, and children's assessments.

In this approach, teachers got opportunities to share their understanding and experiences along with learnings from peers. In addition to ECE domain-related sessions, AWTs were oriented on personal and professional development aspects like time management, prioritizing, building and maintaining relations with the community, etc.

APF's resource person and supervisor provide support at various levels to build confidence in engaging with the community and organizing the 'ECCE Day' effectively, by showcasing children's work of that month. This was done in collaboration with functionaries in the district. The functionaries and the APF team sat together and planned many such activities regularly to facilitate child development.

The monthly sector meeting engagement provides an opportunity for discussions, demonstrations, and hands-on experiences in monthly curricular activities by using appropriate materials. Overall, the teacher develops an understanding of how to conduct the curricular activities in an effective manner with the children. As a follow-up engagement of the workshop and the sector meeting, APF team members provide onsite support to AWTs to build confidence and remove hesitancy through activities like action songs, dramatization, plays, etc., with children. This engagement includes active observations and giving feedback on teacher practices and center arrangements for further improvement, need-based activity demonstrations, discussion on planning and implementation, and the use of available resources. This will build the confidence of AWTs in handling multiple situations comfortably and make them independent in a sustainable manner.

To strengthen the support system to AWTs, we engage with functionaries to enhance their understanding of ECE and their role in the better functioning of AWCs. Many community members have started contributing to

strengthen the AWCs, and it has helped the teachers to take on more responsibilities for child development.

Effects of the work

Understanding the effects of our core engagements with teachers is a significant part of the program. Its effectiveness is tracked using quantitative and qualitative information to systematically reflect on and review the change (or effect) on the teachers' and children's development. To understand what went well and what needs to be improved, the APF team interacts with multiple stakeholders (AWTs, supervisors, CDPOs). This helps in making the requisite modifications in the program and to work toward the expected outcomes. We have used ECEQAS, Teacher Development Tracking and ELA (Early Learner Assessment) tools to monitor the program. Some glimpses of the program's impact are share here.

Safe, secure and hygienic environment:

Significant changes were observed in ensuring a safe, secure environment in and around the centre. Optimal utilization of space was observed in ECE activities, material storage and feeding with safety measures. Capacitating AWHs on these aspects helped to ensure the center's and children's hygiene. This resulted in an increased number of students washing their hands before and after eating, using the toilet, and after playing with clay/mud.

Classroom environment: There has been a significant improvement in the arrangement of materials and accessibility to the children, arranging the class aesthetically with print-rich materials, children's work display, and seating according to age-appropriate activities. It was seen that the teachers arranged materials in various learning corners as mentioned in NEP 2020.

Developmental opportunities: The overall duration of ECE activities in a day increased in terms of the number of activities and

their duration, involving all children by using appropriate materials. Earlier, teachers used to conduct only a few activities like songs, plays, stories and conversations, that too for short duration. However, now teachers were able to focus on readiness activities (emergent literacy, pre-numeracy), cognitive abilities, and socio-emotional aspects. This resulted in increasing teachers' engagement time with children.

Teacher dispositions: Encouraging social interactions during free play and sensitivity towards special needs and socially disadvantaged children increased compared to the baseline. There was a decline in the practices of the teacher and the helper related to child abuse, naming, threatening, etc. Teachers have become more sensitive and inclusive towards children and their needs.

Functionaries' involvement: Now functionaries are paying attention toward ECE by doing follow-ups on workshop practices, allocating time for workshops, activities practice in sector meetings, guiding teachers in ensuring basic things in AWCs, etc.

In conclusion

All these changes have resulted in observable changes in AWTs' planning and execution of day and weekly activities. These have also had positive effects on the children's physical, language, cognitive and social development.

In the context of NEP, the need for quality education at the foundational stage can be significantly addressed by strengthening AWCs in the country. The current policy and programmatic emphasis on 'Poshan bhi padhai bhi' is a key initiative to strengthen ECCE under Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0. A key objective of these recently launched programs is 'training the Anganwadi teachers to support early childhood education'.

The consolidation of institutional experiences and learnings to work on 'Anganwadi teachers capacity building' is an important task. This can help toward providing a quality and stimulating environment to all disadvantaged children across India to achieve the goals set by NEP 2020.

M Sreenivasa Rao (MSR) has been a leader at Azim Premji Foundation (APF) in Telangana since 2005. With over 25 years of experience in education, including roles at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, PRIA, and ODI, he brings extensive expertise to his work. MSR holds a Master's and M. Phil in Anthropology from Andhra University. During his tenure, MSR played a pivotal role in conducting large-scale randomized evaluation studies (AP REST) in collaboration with the Government of Andhra Pradesh and the World Bank. These studies aimed to generate evidence-based policies for enhancing the quality of education. In 2012, he spearheaded the ECE initiative to establish district institutes in Telangana. He actively supports the capacity building of teams and cultivates relationships with state and district functionaries. In addition, he guides different states, including Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, and Puducherry, to initiate their ECE efforts. Furthermore, MSR

mentors teams across various states where APF operates, helping them launch their ECE programs. He contributes his expertise to support organizations such as UNICEF, NIFCID, IGNOU, and state governments in developing ECE curriculum and educational resources. He can be reached at msr@azimpremjifoundation.org.

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Funding strategies, convergence challenges and advocacy for ECCE policy impact

In conversation with Dr Jyotsna Jha



Dr Jyotsna Jha currently heads Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Bengaluru. She has led a number of research initiatives and co-authored books.

She has also contributed to literature related to equity in education, gender, women's empowerment and public finance. In recent years, she has worked on a wide range of public policies and finance issues.

These include gender budgeting, health finance and public spending on children. Before that she has worked with various governments and CSOs (civil society organizations) on issues of equity in education.

Vikramshila: National Education Policy (NEP 2020) confirms India's commitment to the SDG 4.2 of universalizing Early Childhood Education (ECE) by 2030. To achieve this goal, substantial financial investment is required. What strategies can the governments employ to secure the substantial financial investment required to achieve the goal?

Dr Jyotsna Jha: Although Early Childhood Development (ECD), which includes health, nutrition and education, has received great attention in the education policy, we still don't have a framework, which lays down each department's responsibilities and how they are supposed to collaborate in order to achieve the goals of NEP 2020.

We have to work with three departments — women and child development, education and health. It would become more efficient and easier if we have a conceptual clarity and know the role of the respective departments.

When we talk about ECD, we solely focus on children's rights and overlook the rights of adults, such as Anganwadi workers and

teachers. Our efforts should be directed towards protecting the rights of all individuals. In this regard, the presence of a comprehensive framework becomes critical.

Coming to estimation of financial requirements, they cannot be determined without well-defined physical and financial markers. However, such markers and figures can only exist if there is a framework in place.

In the past, we focused on developing a framework that emphasized the protection of rights for all individuals involved. It is crucial to consider the rights and well-being of teachers, caregivers, and other personnel involved in the delivery system. They should be treated with respect and provided the necessary protection and support to fulfil their roles effectively.

It is evident that inadequate compensation and poor treatment can negatively impact dedication and willingness to perform at their best. Therefore, training programs and improved remuneration are essential to foster better performance, and ultimately ensure the rights of the child.



Vikramshila

In terms of early childhood education and nutrition, our framework extends beyond mere access. It emphasizes the need for age-appropriate, comprehensive education that aligns with existing knowledge and global standards. In our framework, we have four key pillars: protection of rights, accountability, sustainability, and flexibility.

Let's delve into the aspect of flexibility. When considering urban areas, it becomes apparent that existing rent norms and the growing population in cities pose interconnected challenges. The city-centric development model exacerbates the premium on real estate and rents, making it difficult to provide adequate space. Several studies have highlighted this constraint in urban settings, calling for flexible norms, particularly in rent regulations.

Besides, cost estimates vary based on flexibility and the differences in prices across locations. Cost estimates will vary according to locations. But that doesn't mean that the quality of service is different. For instance, the prices in Mumbai will be higher than those in rural areas. But if we have a framework, which takes into accounts these difference in prices, then making allocations will become easier. Stakeholders will have clarity on the costing estimate.

Determining the exact investment in early childhood development, including education, remains challenging due to varied expenditures by the Central and State governments. Nevertheless, it is estimated that the required investment may be three to five times higher than current allocations from the Central and state budgets.

Regarding resource allocation, collaboration with institutions such as universities, government buildings, and unused physical spaces in urban areas can help optimize resource utilization. Philanthropic involvement can also be encouraged once the costs are established. Additionally, streamlining the allocation process and leveraging technology can enhance efficiency and reduce redundant parallel surveys. Creating a citizen-centric database accessible to officials at various levels can contribute to better decision-making and resource allocation.

Moving forward, it is essential to identify potential sources of resources. This requires a comprehensive examination of available funding options. Engaging with stakeholders, including government bodies and NGOs, can help identify innovative funding mechanisms. By exploring various avenues, we can secure

the necessary resources to support early childhood development.

Vikramshila: What steps are being taken by the state governments to ensure that the additional funding required for ECCE is allocated and utilized efficiently? Can you give some examples based on your experience?

Dr Jyotsna Jha: Yes, I think several southern states in India, as well as Maharashtra, have been allocating additional funds for ECCE. For instance, Karnataka spends more than it receives, with its contribution to the union being higher than what it receives in return.

There are various schemes and initiatives implemented by state governments such as Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu. They have extended hours, social security and retirement benefits for Anganwadi workers. Therefore, perhaps, Government of India (GoI) needs to extend more support to states which have not been able to spend enough on ECCE.

In one of our comparative analyses, we have observed that in certain states issues such as privatization and the need for better regulatory frameworks were identified. However, it's important to highlight that there are also positive examples where states have recognized the significance of nutrition and education and have shaped policies accordingly. They have taken significant steps towards integration and addressing various issues related to early childhood education and development.

Vikramshila: Within the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program, which includes ECCE, health, and nutrition services, how can convergence between these programs be achieved? How will the NEP's placement of ECE under the education department impact this convergence?

Dr Jyotsna Jha: I am wary about the integration of Anganwadi centres with

primary schools for several reasons. One concern is the downward shift of expectations, where early childhood centres are pressured to prepare children for school admissions.

Even though admission tests have been made illegal, the reality is that preparation for admissions still occurs. Government schools also expect children entering class 1 to have prior knowledge of letters and numbers, creating a burden on early childhood centres to focus on rote learning rather than holistic development.

Another issue, I have observed, is the power relationship between schools and Anganwadi Centres. I don't see a relationship of equality, although I see a lot of space for cross-learning. How can that happen if one is not open? A teacher who receives higher compensation will be disinclined towards learning from an Anganwadi worker, who earns a much lower pay, even if they are equally educated. This power hierarchy has to be broken.

There is a third concern with regard to women being unable to leave their children, especially those aged between 0-3 years, as Anganwadis are yet to function as proper creches.

While there have been attempts to bring about change in education, certain factors impede progress. Our search for measurement and learning outcomes sometimes undermines the quality of education. I recall an experience shared by a young professional who witnessed a stimulating classroom discussion in class 2 on water conservation since the school was facing water crisis.

This was disregarded by an observer at system level, focused solely on meeting competency checklists as per NIPUN Bharat Guidelines. Consequently, a report was submitted emphasizing the shortcomings of the class. I hope that we can move beyond

these challenges and work towards creating a more holistic, inclusive, and child-centric education system that nurtures creativity, critical thinking, and overall development.

Vikramshila: How can research be used to support policy and budgeting decisions for early childhood education? What specific types of research can civil society organizations (CSOs) conduct to ensure a strategic and effective financial outlay?

Dr Jyotsna Jha: I firmly believe that if all CSOs unite and agree on a common framework, we can effectively influence change, even though there may be minor differences in our approaches. This framework can serve as a guideline, allowing flexibility and adaptation.

There can be several spaces that can be used for advocacy. One has to build public opinion and mobilize the middle class and gain their support. Only then we can expand our network of advocates. Collaboration allows us to work simultaneously in different areas, such as cost, budget analysis, and classroom practices, amplifying the impact of our efforts.

For instance, the organization Haq was at the forefront of introducing the concept of a child budget in India. While they had their specific approach, we began working with Karnataka budgets and took a position that the existing approach was inadequate. Slowly, it got noticed. Today, we are hoping the possibility of collaborating with the Ministry of Finance, to advocate for a different budgetary approach that incorporates our insights.

Our efforts have led to invitations from certain states and resource agencies. We have been actively involved in these endeavours since 2014. Over the past decade, we have witnessed a noticeable movement taking shape. It's worth noting that despite not being a particularly powerful organization, strategic collaborations have allowed us to access influential positions and institutions.

Open communication, active listening, and a shared framework are key to achieving the goals of NEP. We all face constraints and sustain our work through various projects. Yet these limitations should not hinder our capacity for innovative thinking.

It is possible for us to establish a position that garners widespread consensus and seek funding through various avenues. By consistently working towards our shared vision, we can strive for a responsive government that aligns with our goals.

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Vikramshila

Promoting inclusion in ECCE

Challenges, strategies and pathways to develop inclusive classrooms

In conversation with Dr Monimalika Day



Dr Monimalika Day (Ph.D. Special Education, University of Maryland) teaches in the School of Education Studies at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. She specializes in child development, early childhood education and special education. She has worked in NGOs and has taught in universities in India and the USA. She has partnered with UNICEF state offices and the World Bank to develop parenting programs and strengthen preschool education in various states in India. Her empirical research on early stimulation, quality of preschool education, inclusion of children with disabilities, teacher education, and collaboration between schools and families has been published in various journals and books.

Vikramshila: What is inclusion? What kind of challenges do ECCE programs encounter in promoting inclusion?

What strategies can be implemented to overcome these challenges and ensure inclusive environments?

Dr Monimalika Day: According to the National Association for Education of Young Children and the Division for Exceptional Children in the US, inclusive education is built on three fundamental pillars: access, participation and systemic support. To achieve inclusive early childhood care and education (ECCE), it is essential that all the three pillars are addressed.

In various sectors, such as private, government, and NGOs, instances have been observed where children from marginalized castes attend ECCE centers, while the teachers themselves belong to dominant castes. I have heard stories where teachers do not allow certain children to touch them, and they are often made to sit at the back of the classroom. This type of social

environment conveys a clear message to the children that they are not valued and that the classroom is not their rightful place.

When it comes to access, there are certain areas where we observe limited representation of certain groups in ECCE programs. For instance, during my visits to Anganwadis in West Bengal, I have never come across a child with a disability in the classroom. However, according to the World Health Organization's report on disability, it is estimated that approximately 15% of the population in any given area has some form of disability. Moreover, in areas where concerns such as malnutrition and inadequate access to healthcare exist, the percentage of individuals with disabilities is likely to be even higher. Unfortunately, many young children with disabilities are unable to access ECCE services altogether.

Another significant aspect to consider is the participation of children within the ECCE programs. In certain cases, children from historically marginalized castes

are not allowed to fully participate in various classroom activities, unlike their counterparts from dominant castes.

I witnessed an example during my visit to a village, where both an Anganwadi and a balwadi were present, representing two separate early childhood programs. As I engaged in conversations with the local community, I discovered that the Anganwadi was situated in an area predominantly inhabited by higher caste families. Consequently, the children attending that Anganwadi primarily belonged to those families.

However, an issue arose due to the meal program provided by the Anganwadi. There were concerns about allowing children from different castes to eat together. This situation highlights how existing systemic problems are being perpetuated. Without genuine efforts and specific initiatives to address the issue of inclusion, we risk perpetuating and institutionalizing the very problems we seek to overcome.

In discussing participation, let us consider a scenario where a child with a visual disability is enrolled in a high-end private school. The child is seated at the back of the classroom with a group of other children and lacks the necessary learning resources, such as braille materials. The predominant teaching methods rely heavily on the use of visual materials including smartboard. The child is thus unable to participate in most activities fully. The child's parents have independently hired a special educator who provides additional tutoring at home. This situation creates a parallel system rather than fostering genuine inclusion.

When we examine participation, it is essential to evaluate whether the child is able to fully engage in all aspects of the educational environment. For example, we need to ensure that the child can participate in playground activities. It is not acceptable for other children to be playing football, while the

child with a disability is left on the sidelines in a wheelchair. To address this issue, we must consider creating inclusive games and activities where all children can actively participate. By promoting inclusivity, we send the message that every child is capable and valued and belong to that community. When we exclude the child from the activity, we are limiting the child's learning opportunities.

The third pillar is systemic support. Often the child or the child's family is blamed for inclusion not working. It is said that the families are in denial about the child's disability. However, it is crucial to recognize that families are not in denial about their child's needs. In fact, they spend a significant amount of time with their child and possess valuable insights that professionals may not have. Their concerns often stem from the fear that once their child is labelled, the child may face discrimination. Therefore, it is essential that the process of diagnosis or labeling is connected to appropriate support services. Each child's needs and strengths may vary. Therefore, there is a need to develop individualized education plans for every child.

In many instances, schools tend to focus on basic self-help tasks only, such as providing baths and clean clothes, which is very problematic. It is assumed that the child is not capable of engaging in academic activities, and is often prepared only for vocational training. This approach fails to value the diversity among learners and their unique abilities. Inclusion, when addressing disability or any other form of marginalization, is about valuing and respecting the diverse contributions of individuals within society.

Vikramshila: How can early childhood educators be trained to ensure that they are able to create an inclusive learning environment that promotes gender equality and social justice?

Dr Monimalika Day: There is a significant gap in training when it comes to inclusive

education. In-service trainings, when they do occur, are often sporadic, and lack clear definitions and mentorship. Furthermore, collaborations between educators and specialists, such as physical or occupational therapists, is limited or non-existent in many settings. There needs to be systemic changes to foster collaboration.

Often, there is a separate resource room where children may receive additional assistance. However, even that support may be inconsistent. Most schools lack Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). They fail to provide individualized services based on proper assessment in a timely manner. This approach reflects a charity approach, rather than a comprehensive and systemic support.

However, having worked in the US, I have witnessed educators and special educators collaboratively plan and teach entire classes or specific components together. For instance, occupational therapists with expertise in fine motor skills can contribute to improving the writing abilities of kindergarten children. Through programs like 'Mat Man,' children engage with basic shapes of English alphabets, learning through play and creating different letters.

This approach benefits children diagnosed with disabilities. It also helps those who struggle with reading and writing difficulties. When professionals from various disciplines collaborate with the teachers, positive outcomes can be achieved. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) need to work together to identify the criteria for preparing teachers to create inclusive classrooms.

Unfortunately, the current lack of synergy between requirements of the two agencies exemplifies the systemic support issues that need to be addressed. Even if a teacher is committed to creating an inclusive environment in their classroom, they often

have to go above and beyond their duty. The time required for collaboration between the special educator and the regular teacher, for example, is rarely allocated. This leaves little time for lesson planning. These challenges underscore the systemic problems that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Vikramshila: How do you know that inclusion is being implemented? How can the community and parents be included in this discourse?

Dr Monimalika Day: When inclusion is happening, there is a sense of belongingness for the children and families. They feel "I'm respected. I'm appreciated for whoever I am." To bring about meaningful change, it is essential to engage with local communities and understand their perspectives and challenges. External interventions that are short-lived and not sustained will not lead to significant transformation.

Instead, we need to identify the issues that local people perceive as problems and work collaboratively to address them. For instance, some balwadi programs have specifically introduced a snack time in their routine to address issues of caste discrimination from a young age. This simple initiative can be a 'low hanging fruit' that brings about meaningful change.

It is important to acknowledge that while there may be major issues that cannot be ignored, we must also start somewhere. Otherwise, we inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of oppression. For instance, when discussing parenting aspirations, it is crucial to engage in conversations with parents and challenge gender stereotypes. By asking open-ended questions about their aspirations for their children, we can encourage them to think beyond traditional gender roles. Additionally, inviting professionals from diverse fields, such as lady police officers, nurses, and doctors, to

speak with parents and children about their careers and experiences can broaden their horizons and challenge societal norms.

From an ecological perspective, it is evident that change cannot be confined to the classroom alone. We must strive to transform the entire context surrounding ECCE programs. By engaging in these small but meaningful discussions and initiatives, we can begin to reshape the attitudes, beliefs and aspirations of families and communities.

Vikramshila: Should gender and social inclusion be a separate component or cross-cutting theme in the ECCE curriculum? Additionally, what strategies and recommendations can you provide for designing a curriculum that addresses the specific needs of marginalized groups?

Dr Monimalika Day: Both gender and social inclusion should be incorporated into the ECCE curriculum. However, it is important to have focused activities as well. The overall curriculum must address the broader framework of inclusion and discussions around marginalization. The specific emphasis, however, may vary depending on the context. For example, in certain communities, gender may not be a significant issue, but socioeconomic class might be. Therefore, the curriculum should be adaptable to the needs of the community and the learners.

It is crucial to recognize that teachers themselves may have experienced various forms of oppression related to caste, class or gender. Considering this, it becomes essential to provide training and ongoing support that addresses these issues. For instance, some organizations like incorporated gender-focused training alongside curriculum development. This helps create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all women, including those who may have disabilities. Empowering teachers is an important step towards achieving effective gender and social inclusion in ECCE.

Unfortunately, the reality is that Anganwadi workers often face systemic challenges and are burdened with excessive work expectations without adequate compensation. This limits their ability to fully engage in implementing inclusive practices. Addressing these systemic issues requires a broader societal commitment to valuing and supporting the crucial work of Anganwadi workers.

In terms of strategies and activities, it is beneficial to align the curriculum with specific learning goals for children with disabilities. This can be achieved by identifying the competencies associated with each activity and determining how a child with a disability can benefit from it. By integrating special education and general curriculum, the activity remains inclusive while focusing on the individual learning needs of the child. Existing frameworks can provide guidance in this regard.

I remember speaking to a woman who had a disability. She shared her experiences with me. When she attended her first training in Almora in Uttarakhand, she had never stepped out of her house before. She told me that during the 10-day program, she stayed upstairs for the first 7 days, because she was so afraid to join the training. It was a significant step for her.

During my time there, as I collected data for my research, she approached me and asked what I would give in return for the information she shared. Her question highlighted her journey of empowerment. It was a powerful moment that reminded me of the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for individuals like her.

Vikramshila: How can we incorporate activities and design resources that promote inclusion in the ECCE curriculum? Are there any specific recommendations you would like to share for practitioners, educators and organizations?

Dr Monimalika Day: In many schools, there is a requirement for implementing a system called Response to Intervention (RTI). This approach brings about systemic change by conducting screenings to identify students who may be struggling academically. Based on the results, interventions are designed to provide support to both high-achieving students and those who need additional assistance. Small group work is emphasized to ensure that all children, regardless of their performance level, have opportunities for engagement.

Ideally, a curriculum should include activities for large groups, small groups, and individual work. However, we often observe that even in high-end schools, there is a heavy emphasis on large group activities, with minimal small group or individualized attention. Consequently, some children who are unable to keep up with the pace may fall behind. Prof. Mohanty from JNU often reminded us that there are only “push outs not drop outs.”

It is essential to shift our focus from solely identifying children's problems to recognizing their strengths and talents. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) should be developed to address deficits and nurture and enhance children's strengths. By acknowledging and nurturing the strengths of each child, we contribute to their holistic development. For instance, if we view someone like Stephen Hawking merely as a person with physical disabilities, we fail to recognize the immense intellectual contributions he made to the world. It is a huge loss for the society when we overlook the strengths and potential of individuals.

Moreover, the need for inclusivity extends beyond disabilities and encompasses other aspects such as gender and race. It is crucial to provide diverse materials and resources that reflect the various facial features, complexions, and backgrounds of children. This includes dolls and other play materials that represent the diverse population. It

may be challenging to find commercially available products that address every local context. However, we can explore creating standard kits and providing guidance to local communities to develop materials that align with their specific needs and the diversity in their community.

Procuring materials solely from the mainstream market limits our options and reinforces dominant narratives. We need to challenge and reshape these market norms by actively involving designers who can cater to the unique requirements of inclusive education. By collaborating with experts in design, we can create materials that better serve the diverse needs of children. This will also help in breaking free from the limitations of what is commonly available in the market.

Furthermore, institutions like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) have significant influence due to their large scale and reach. They can play a role in guiding the market by clearly communicating their design requirements and engaging designers who can create materials that align with the principles of inclusivity. We need to leverage the expertise of designers and incorporate the specific needs of diverse learners. By doing this, we can ensure that educational materials and resources are inclusive and representative of all children.

Vikramshila: In your opinion, what role can policymakers and government agencies play in promoting gender and social inclusion in ECCE programs?

Dr Monimalika Day: Convergence between different policies in the Indian context is lacking, especially at the policy level. It is crucial for the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), the Department of Education and the Health Department to work together when addressing the needs of children with disabilities. In the United States, they have implemented an Inter-Agency Coordinating Council. There representatives from various departments

collaborate and ensure their alignment with decision-making processes.

It is essential to have such coordination and convergence in India as well. For instance, when considering changes like the co-location of the Anganwadi or the focus on foundational learning, it is important to determine if the MWCD is on board with the Department of Education's initiatives. Strengthening these convergences and establishing committees or councils on the ground can be helpful in monitoring and facilitating necessary changes.

Additionally, collecting relevant data is crucial for effective monitoring and evaluation. It is important to track indicators such as the enrolment and graduation rates of children with disabilities and children from marginalized backgrounds. Without monitoring, these issues can easily go unnoticed. These then result in lack of appropriate interventions and support. Therefore, data collection should go beyond mere access to education and consider broader outcomes.

In terms of promoting inclusive education, many organizations have focused on specific issues like disabilities or gender. However, there is still a need for a comprehensive framework that defines and translates inclusion on the ground. While the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act does provide

a definition of inclusion, its practical implementation requires more clarity.

Principles of Universal Designs have been used to develop Universal Designs for Learning. In developing a curriculum, it is crucial to involve special educators from the beginning. This can ensure that their expertise informs the process effectively.

A participatory process is essential. One way to achieve it is by involving persons with disabilities in these initiatives. They bring valuable experiential knowledge from their own educational journeys, even if they may not be well-versed in research. Their perspectives can contribute to the focus and direction of committees or working groups. This can be especially useful when it comes to addressing issues faced by marginalized communities.

The curriculum development work in West Bengal serves as an excellent example. It has had representatives from CDPOs, DPOs, supervisors, and other relevant stakeholders. The inclusion of all necessary voices in the participatory process ensures greater acceptance and relevance of the developed curriculum. The fact that it was created in the local language, Bengali, and later translated, further reinforces its importance and effectiveness.

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Vikramshila

Empowering ECCE professionals

IGNOU's unique offerings, and recommendations for capacity building

In conversation with Dr Rekha Sharma Sen



Dr Rekha Sharma Sen is Professor, Faculty of Child Development, School of Continuing Education, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. She has a Master's Degrees in Child Development and Elementary Education from University of Delhi and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, respectively.

At IGNOU, she has designed, developed and coordinated programs of study in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). She has also developed programs for parents and family members of persons with disabilities.

Vikramshila: Can you please elaborate on IGNOU's offering on ECCE? How can it cater to the needs of pre-school educators? How does IGNOU's offering for pre-school educators differ from other programs currently available?

Dr Rekha Sharma Sen: Our IGNOU Diploma program on ECCE was the first open and distance learning program in the field. It was introduced in 1995, making the domain of ECCE accessible to individuals who couldn't pursue face-to-face training or wanted to refresh their knowledge.

The course material is unique in many ways. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge about children's development, developmentally appropriate and effective play-based pedagogy for early years, practical descriptions of activities and materials to be used with children, as well as knowhow of establishing an early childhood care and education centre.

Its uniqueness stems from its broad-based approach. This is unlike other training manuals available at that time, which

primarily provided a list of activities, without building the student's knowledge base regarding the theoretical constructs on which the play-based activities are based.

The Diploma in ECCE goes beyond just a description of activities. Instead, it explains the why, what, and how of ECCE. It empowers learners to understand the reasoning behind what they are expected to do as early childhood educators.

The program comprehensively combines knowledge about children and play-based early childhood education, with detailed understanding of child health and nutrition. It went far beyond merely providing a list of recipes for supplementary feeding. Instead, it provided an understanding of child health

and nutrition, including recommended dietary allowances, balanced diets, and how to convert the recommendations into practical menus. This component was of utmost importance, as it offered a holistic understanding of young children's nutritional requirements, the concept of a balanced diet, and the ability to create diverse daily menus with multiple meals.

There was another vital and enduring aspect that I must credit to the course editor, Dr S. Anandalakshmy, the Former Director of Lady Irvin College, and the Editor of this diploma program. She envisioned a segment on childhood illnesses. What if the children attending the centre fell ill? What actions should the personnel and teachers take in such situations? As a result, 8 to 10 chapters were dedicated to early childhood illnesses and their management within the centre.

These chapters not only covered the centre's perspective but also provided guidance on how to communicate with parents about signs and symptoms of illnesses affecting various body systems and organs: alimentary, respiratory, mouth, ear, nose, throat, eyes and skin.

The descriptions were detailed enough to equip learners functionally. These enabling them to know what to do, when to act mindfully, when urgency is required, and when it might not be. Of course, the course did not provide treatment instructions, as we cannot replace medical professionals. However, by offering knowledge about the signs and symptoms, we aimed to raise awareness and empower teachers to guide parents effectively. This unique aspect ensured that teachers possessed vital information to recognize potential illnesses and play a proactive role in promoting children's well-being.

Yet another significant aspect was the explicit focus on children with disabilities. This was quite ground-breaking at the time. Inclusion wasn't as widely discussed or integrated into early childhood education as it is today. However, we recognized its importance and dedicated eight chapters to help learners understand disability, its impact on learning and development, and how to support children with disabilities in the early childhood classroom.

It was an exceptional addition to our syllabus, promoting inclusive early childhood care and

education. We delved into various types of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), hearing impairment, visual impairment, and physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy. Furthermore, we tackled the challenging topic of managing difficult behaviour in children, providing practical strategies for teachers to navigate such situations.

The program of study lays explicit emphasis on development of practical skills. Almost 40% of the course is dedicated to hands-on experiences and internship. With 32 credits in total, 18 focus on theoretical knowledge, while the remaining credits are allocated to field-based experiences.

Students have the opportunity to work directly with children in preschools, engaging in activities for 30 working days. They also complete home-based practical activities. These experiences allowed learners to observe children's development, design balanced diets, and interact closely with families, nurturing their skills in real-world settings. The program strikes a careful balance between theory and practice. It, thus, ensures that graduates are well-prepared for the demands of the field.

One aspect that we always took great care of was to include real-life examples of children, showcasing their development, abilities, thinking and activities. These were not fictional scenarios but real-life instances that we had encountered, observed, or heard about. We captured these moments and integrated them into the course materials to provide tangible and relatable contexts. By connecting theory with everyday observations of children, we aimed to make the content more engaging and accessible for learners.

As an academic offering, these unique features truly set our program apart. The program garnered positive recognition. It even surprising us when renowned educators

commended its well-written materials during conferences. It was a testament to the quality and impact of the program.

Vikramshila: What were the enrolment patterns for the ECCE diploma program, particularly in relation to the gender distribution and regional participation? Was there any impact on the perceptions and motivations of learners regarding job opportunities, considering the lack of official recognition for diplomas obtained through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode?

Dr Rekha Sharma Sen: After the initial years, the enrolment in our program stabilized at 3,000 to 4,000. In 2019, we experienced a significant shift in enrolment patterns for the diploma program, which had a direct correlation with the growing importance of ECCE in the education system. It was remarkable to see a massive enrolment from Punjab, and enhanced enrolment from Odisha, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Delhi always had a high enrolment pattern.

We learnt that in Punjab, the government was planning to open up nursery sections in all schools. While we never received an official letter from the Punjab government regarding job opportunities, there was a perception among learners that completing the ECCE diploma would increase their chances of being considered for teaching positions. The implementation of regulations for private schools in certain states such as Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra also appeared to have a positive impact on our diploma, as learners sought to obtain qualifications.

The changing dynamics of enrolment had both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it created a more balanced gender distribution, with almost an equal percentage of men and women enrolling. Prior to 2019, the program had been dominated by women, but that started to change. Additionally, the urban-centric nature of the program also

changed with learners enrolling from rural areas.

In 2016, before ECCE gained nationwide recognition that it has now, I conducted a study to explore the motivations of learners for joining the diploma program. I found that learners joined with varied motivations. Some learners were already working in the sector of ECCE. They sought to upgrade their qualifications. This was either because they lacked any formal qualifications, while others were encouraged or even required by their employers to obtain this diploma as its course content was seen to be of good quality. Some learners reported that though they had an ECCE Diploma from some institution, their employers demanded that they complete this IGNOU Diploma.

A surprising group of learners were those who had no prior experience in ECCE. They were in fact from different fields such as computers or management. They were motivated to enrol in the ECCE program, as they wanted to change their careers due to a variety of reasons, and saw ECCE as a suitable and interesting career. These two categories of learners were very satisfied with the program outcomes. They agreed that the course material provided valuable insights and knowledge, rather than simply being a set of activities.

Another group of learners I observed were young individuals who were primarily focused on securing a job. However, the outcome for these learners had both positive and negative aspects. Many of them pursued the ECCE diploma with the hope of getting a job. However, they were often left disappointed. Although the program holds immense value in terms of quality materials and content, there is no official recognition from accrediting bodies. Neither do recruitment rules for employment in the government sector, specifically include qualifications obtained through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.

In 2014, a committee, chaired by Professor Venita Kaul, was formed to establish ODL norms for teacher training diplomas. Recommendations were submitted to the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). Unfortunately, no significant progress was made. Currently, there are no established norms for offering distance education courses in the field of teacher training. As a result, the ECCE diploma obtained through ODL is not considered legitimate for employment in the government sector.

As a consequence, these learners who pursued the ECCE program with the goal of securing jobs now mostly aim for opportunities in the private sector. It is worth noting that the private sector often offers lower salaries and may not provide the same level of stability as government positions. Interestingly, a significant portion of the learners engaging in the program immediately after completing their 12th-grade education falls within this group.

My study from 2016 provides valuable insights into motivations that may still be relevant today. However, I believe that conducting a similar study now may yield different responses due to the current landscape where ECCE has become the sought-after choice for many individuals.

Vikramshila: We've heard that IGNOU is developing a certificate course on ECCE. How was this conceived? How is this offering unique compared to the diploma course?

Dr Rekha Sharma Sen: Yes, we have devised a six-month certificate program in ECCE. The conception of this program took into consideration the need for a more practical approach to education, with less emphasis on theoretical content. What makes this program unique is that it is aimed at individuals who are already working in the field and wish to upgrade their knowledge and skills.

The program directly caters to the requirements of the 3 years of pre-

primary education, addressing the need to differentiate activities for different age groups within this range. It focuses on distinguishing activities appropriate for the 3-plus, 4-plus, and 5-plus age levels. For instance, it will help to understand what music or art activities at different levels of pre-primary education can be conducted, i.e., pre-primary level 1, pre-primary level 2 and pre-primary level 3. This aspect sets it apart from the diploma and postgraduate diploma programs.

Another notable feature of the certificate program is the emphasis on self-exploration and the use of a learning journal to document capabilities and skills. In contrast, the diploma program involves a more formal assessment process, where learners working in preschools submit project files for evaluation at IGNOU. With the certificate program, learners will be encouraged to submit their learning records, including activity recordings, at their own local centres. This process aims to promote a decentralized assessment approach that considers the specific contexts and needs of the learners.

The content and assessment procedures of the certificate program will differ based on the specific course objectives. The target audience for this program primarily consists of individuals already working in the field. However, it is open to anyone interested, as there are no restrictions on enrolment. It is expected though that learners entering the certificate program would have some prior experience or understanding due to their working background or previous training.

Vikramshila: Based on your experiences, what are your recommendations to the states who are looking to improve their capacity building programs?

Dr Rekha Sharma Sen: It is important to address the learning loss that may occur in the cascade model of training, where master trainers train subsequent trainers,

resulting in a potential decrease in quality as information is passed down. There should be more extensive handholding and support provided at the grassroots level by academic institutions.

Sustaining the motivation of teachers is another crucial aspect. Both the public and private sectors face unique challenges. We demand more and more of the teachers. But have we put into place systems that reward them? This includes implementing systems that recognize and reward their efforts, tailored to the specific contexts of each sector.

In India, where supply often exceeds demand, there is a tendency to neglect worker motivations, assuming that someone else will fill the role at the same level. However, this approach leads to wastage of capacity, time, and training investments. Neglecting motivation can lead to wasted capacities and training efforts.

Considering the significance ECE has gained, it is vital to focus on the quality of training programs. This may involve establishing a national-level body, independent of existing organizations, to assess and accredit different training models. Streamlining and recognizing various training approaches and their unique features would provide a more comprehensive understanding of their efficacy.

Increased supervision is crucial for ensuring effective implementation. Based on my experience of working with ICDS, and the pilot testing of the restructured PSE curriculum through a study in 2013, we found that the involvement of supervisors played a significant role in improving outcomes. The findings of the national level report were significant, as almost everyone observed that an enhanced curriculum and improved training had a positive impact.

I remember the phase when these changes were implemented, as there was increased

supervision by the supervisors. This led to a stronger sense of connection and a feeling of support among the Anganwadi workers. They experienced a boost to their self-esteem, when community members started referring to them as ‘teachers’ rather than as just ‘workers.’

When the three levels of staff—the Anganwadi worker, Supervisor, and CDPO—worked together in sync and received adequate support, we witnessed excellent outcomes. The time allocated for implementing preschool education activities, especially the 2 and a half hours devoted by the Anganwadi worker, played a crucial role.

It is essential to prioritize freeing up their time or providing additional support, such as another Anganwadi worker, to fully realize the benefits of training. Merely having the motivation and training isn’t enough, if there’s a lack of time or supervision to execute the desired tasks. It’s unfair to burden Anganwadi workers alone with the responsibility of non-performance.

Instead, they should be empowered and supported to perform at their best. Ultimately, the responsibility for addressing low performance lies with those higher up in the hierarchy. We must find ways to enable the individuals we supervise or work with to excel.

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Vikramshila

Building a strong foundation

Nurturing children in the first 1000 days

In conversation with Zakiya Kurrien



Zakiya Kurrien co-founded Centre for Learning Resources (CLR), Pune, in 1984, and is presently its Director Emerita.

She has an M.A. in Education, USA. She has designed curricula, training programs, and varied materials in the ECCE and Primary Education domains.

She is co-author of the 'CLR Parent/Caregiver Education Package' and has recently served on the National Task Force on ECCE.

Vikramshila: The first 1,000 days of a child's life, which include pregnancy and the first two years after birth, are considered a critical window for ensuring optimal growth and development. Despite the importance of both the first 1,000 days and the pre-school years, there are often gaps in policies and programs designed to support children during these critical periods, especially 0-3 years.

How are families with young children currently being supported in terms of healthcare, nutrition and early development? Is the provision adequate? Are there any challenges or barriers that families face in accessing these services?

Zakiya Kurrien: That's a very good place to begin, because one has to get a feel for the existing landscape first. In terms of catering to children in the first 1,000 days of their lives, there are various programs and schemes. The principal one amongst them being the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), offering six services.

There are also other schemes that directly or indirectly cater to children in this age group. In the health sector, we have the Reproductive and Child Health, the National

Rural Health Mission, now Poshan Abhiyan, PM Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan, Bal Swasthya Karyakram, etc., which focus on providing healthcare and nutrition.

However, the coverage of these services falls short of the actual requirement. Another scheme is the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme. However, it needs further augmentation to effectively serve working mothers in vulnerable communities.

It is commonly understood that ICDS covers all children. However, in reality, it covers less than 50% of the children in this age group. The coverage is even lower in states like Bihar and Rajasthan. There are several barriers to overcome in accessing these services. Families in remote regions face difficulties due to factors such as long distances and inadequate presence of workers like ASHA workers.

One of the major barriers is that mothers carry multiple responsibilities, including household chores and childcare. They often also engage in daily wage labour in the unorganized sector. The gendered nature of caregiving places a significant burden on mothers, with minimal support from male family members.

Consequently, mothers bear the primary responsibility for accessing healthcare centres, taking their children for growth monitoring, and so on. These challenges and barriers highlight the existing gaps in services. There is a need for better accessibility and support for disadvantaged families with young children.

Vikramshila: Children from low-income families and marginalized groups are often at greater risk for poor outcomes during the first 1,000 days. How should programs aim to address these inequalities?

Zakiya Kurrien: I feel that for anyone concerned with children's rights, it's crucial to understand the extent of inequality and the level of developmental risks. You are certainly right that the disadvantaged need urgent and extra attention to bridge inequality.

The statistics are alarming. Around 25% of under-five years children belong to the poorest quintile of households in our country. Nearly 20% of the under-fives are undernourished. What I found staggering was that 90% of children aged 6 months to 2 years do not have an adequate diet. Obesity seems to be an epidemic among the well-to-do urban population. However, children in marginalized communities go hungry and suffer from stunting and wasting.

Furthermore, the first 1,000 days are extremely significant for human brain development and the capacity to learn. Needless to say good nutrition and healthcare impact cognitive outcomes. There's also the importance of early mental and psychosocial stimulation. Global research has established that infant stimulation has a positive impact even on physical growth outcomes.

A survey conducted by our organization, Centre for Learning Resources (CLR), revealed that there was a total lack of understanding of this aspect in our rural and urban slum communities. There was no awareness that playing and talking to babies and toddlers

was crucial to the development of their intelligence and ability to learn throughout life.

To bridge these inequalities, it is the government that has to play the major role. Universalizing ICDS is a must. Restructuring the scheme to provide direct services to children from birth to 3 years through creche facilities is overdue. This would enable mothers to have unfettered access to wage employment. It will also ensure that their children receive comprehensive care, including health, nutrition and stimulation. Mobile Creches and other successful models can provide technical support and guidance in this area. There is no dearth of knowledge and experience. However, it will require a much greater financial outlay on the government's part.

Two parallel strategies are essential. One is the centre-based approach, where quality creche services can be provided. The other is as important and less expensive. It involves large-scale intensive family education programs, which focus on holistic childcare beyond health and nutrition. These programs should be specially designed and implemented to penetrate the most vulnerable communities.

Parents need to understand their role in holistic childcare and receive practical information on how to provide a nurturing environment in the home, including cognitive stimulation. Both centre-based services and home-based family education programs have the potential to bridge inequalities. However, we have a long way to go.

Vikramshila: Could you please share your experience in designing interventions that support the needs of children aged 0-3 years by giving parents and other caregivers in low-income family's opportunities to learn about early child development and parenting skills?

Zakiya Kurrien: Up to the early 1990s, CLR's focus was primarily on providing technical

support, training and materials for ECE and primary education. However, as we became more aware of the growing global research in the neurosciences and its implications for education, we realized the importance of early brain development. We also learnt about the negative effects of undernutrition, iron deficiency, and lack of stimulation and social interaction on young children's brain function.

I have already touched upon the survey we conducted to understand existing childcare practices. A very significant finding was that most parents believed that learning only begins when children go to school. We wanted to change this perception. So we used the slogan, "Learning Begins at Birth," and designed a comprehensive Parent/Caregiver Education Package.

The CLR Package aimed to provide a holistic understanding of childcare. It integrates messages related to health, nutrition, social and emotional development, and stimulation for children aged from birth to 3 years. We developed modules that focused on creating a nurturing and stimulating home environment, while also providing basic knowledge about early child development.

Vikramshila: What strategies or approaches have been successful in the delivery of the CLR Program?

Zakiya Kurrien: When it came to delivering the program in villages and urban slums, a key aspect of our model was a locally recruited woman in each community who was trained to use the resources of the CLR Education Package. This helped her to engage with mothers, grandmothers and other caregivers through a conversational and interactive communication method. This fostered participation and addressed their concerns.

To validate the effectiveness of our approach and materials, to establish proof of concept, we undertook a 2-year action research. The results were very encouraging. These

showed a significant increase in knowledge and positive attitudes among mothers and grandmothers, related to holistic childcare. However, engaging fathers was a challenging task. Although measuring behaviour change was more difficult, we gathered anecdotal evidence and observed several positive outcomes during surprise home-visits.

Since then, the program has been implemented by various NGOs and some government departments. It has undergone revisions to incorporate new insights and improve communication methods. Scaling it up remains a challenge, especially considering the need to address deep-rooted social norms and beliefs.

Digital devices and technology do offer potential for capacity building and training. However, I believe that there is no substitute for face-to-face interactions of caregivers with well-trained communicators. This is especially so, when the goal is to influence actual behaviour change towards responsive parenting.

Culture and context play a significant role in shaping the program's effectiveness. It is essential to consider these factors. A one-size-fits-all approach may not be suitable. But we believe that a generic set of important messages, together with a tried-and-tested delivery model, needs to be made available which can then be contextualized.

Vikramshila: Very recently, MWCD has launched the *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi* Campaign. It has a considerable financial outlay. Can you elaborate on the challenges and limitations in the current governmental programs for holistic early childcare, specifically for children aged 0 to 3 years? What steps should the government prioritize to address these gaps?

Zakiya Kurrien: When I talked about programs for children aged 0 to 3, I mentioned two major types: centre-based creche services and intensive parent/ caregiver education

covering all aspects of holistic childcare. If we look at *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi*, government is definitely allocating resources for nutrition, which does address the needs of children from birth to 3 years old.

The government's commitment to meeting SDG goals related to physical growth of infants within the given timelines is commendable. However, there is a missing piece when it comes to government programs for holistic, nurturing childcare. While centre-based services do exist, they are not widely available. Home-based childcare interventions are sorely lacking.

Interestingly, just a few weeks ago, the *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi* Campaign was launched. It aims to transform Anganwadis into learning centres based on the recommendations of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) had convened a special Early Childhood Care and Education Task Force last year, of which I had the privilege of being a member.

The Task Force placed significant emphasis on the birth to 3 years age group. It also highlighted the need for creches and parent/caregiver education through communication at the grassroots level.

The *Padhai Bhi* component focusing on preschool education for 3–5-year-olds is undoubtedly also a need of the hour. So I'm not belittling state efforts to provide quality preschool education. If Anganwadis can truly become vibrant learning environments, poor parents would be less likely to opt for low-quality, fee-charging schools. These don't provide appropriate pre-school education.

But for the government, it can no longer be an either-or situation. Holistic early childcare has lifelong implications for individual development and the development of our nation's human capital. Therefore, government needs to prioritize this aspect as well.

Vikramshila: How can partnerships be developed between different sectors (e.g., health, social services) to ensure that children aged 0–3 years and their families receive comprehensive and coordinated support?

Zakiya Kurrien: As I mentioned earlier, convergence needs to happen at the community level. However, it's essential for the ministries and administrative leadership in different departments to come together, collaborate and ensure that convergence happens. Over the years, we have talked about it a lot. There have been pockets of success, particularly in the Health Department and the Ministry of Family and Child Welfare. There has been some progress in that the recent MWCD Task Force involved participation from the Education Ministry as well.

However, when it comes to the 0 to 3 years age group, there is still a lack of working together for the well-being of the child, not only within the system, but also among NGOs, panchayats and community members. It would be beneficial to establish an entity that focuses on reaching the child as a whole, bringing together different stakeholders. Community-based events that address the child's health, nutrition, stimulation, and protection can serve as platforms for such convergence.

Vikramshila: What are the funding and resource needs for supporting children aged 0–3 years? How can resources be mobilized and allocated to ensure that young children receive the support they need to thrive?

Zakiya Kurrien: This is a difficult question to answer. In a nutshell, the funding needs are enormous. The allocations are grossly inadequate. Although, there have been sizeable outlays for nutrition in efforts to stem physical growth faltering. One thing to remember regarding financial provision is that you need data as to what is actually the



position of young children in different parts of the country, in order to allocate even available funds appropriately.

We are severely constrained by the paucity of reliable data on the child. The data in the public domain on child development outcomes, impact of schemes, particularly at the state level, is sporadic. Without accurate data, it becomes difficult to inform policy decisions and allocate resources effectively. There is a certain invisibility of how bad the problem is for certain disadvantaged groups.

Another aspect to consider is the capacity of states to utilize the allocated resources. There is a lack of capacity in terms of human resources and other constraints, leading to under-utilization of budgets. Currently, the per child cost norm is insufficient, estimated at rupees 8 to 9 per day, under the ICDS alone.

To achieve the desired child development outcomes, the allocation of resources needs to be quadrupled, according to the report on the 'State of the Young Child in India.' Mobilizing resources requires political will and increased awareness at the highest levels of leadership, both political and administrative. Unfortunately, children often receive low priority in political considerations. It is crucial to raise awareness and build perspective among political and administrative leaders. I think that every Election Manifesto must include a greater focus on the social sector as a whole. Within it, care of our children during the first 1,000 days of their lives has to be prioritized.

Public-private partnerships can play a significant role in resource mobilization. Global funders, foundations, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can contribute.

However, there is often a lack of awareness among corporates about the significance of the first 1,000 days, and the long-term benefits of early child development. Engaging with child-focussed civil society organizations and creating platforms to interact with corporates on this issue, can help increase their allocations towards early childcare.

Lastly, the issue of measuring impact poses a challenge. Immediate and measurable outcomes are often favoured by funders. However, the well-researched, long-term impact of early child development, such as improved learning outcomes in school, success in high school due to responsive parenting during the first 1,000 days, the economic returns to the nation, etc., cannot be easily proven within a short project duration. It is necessary for funders to have a more nuanced understanding of impact. They have to also consider the long-term benefits that may not be immediately visible.

I would like to end with a quote relevant to our topic today. I think it was Nelson Mandela who said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

Another writer, unfortunately I don't have a name at this moment, has poetically expressed a thought that also resonates deeply with our discussions. Emphasizing the urgency of investing in our youngest children, she has written, "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, his mind is being developed. To him, we cannot answer 'Tomorrow.' His name is 'Today.'"

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Shaping experiences

Resources from Vikramshila for holistic development of children

Namrata Ghosh and Riti Mukherjee

Theorists down the ages have been unanimous in their opinion that quality learning materials hold a significant place in Early Childhood Education (ECE). These can include toys, TLMs, and building an environment that promotes exploration, curiosity, freedom and joy. Developmentally appropriate items and curriculum allow pre-schoolers to experiment, engage and solve problems.

They encourage inquisitiveness and imagination. They also support the child's holistic development, which includes physical and motor skills, cognitive skills, language and communication skills, socio-emotional development and creativity.

Learning takes place not only in structured spaces but everywhere. Potentially, each space the child inhabits can become a learning space. In this piece we share with you resources and learning materials developed by Vikramshila Education Resource Society.

For the last three decades, Vikramshila has been working in the area of education. It provides technical support in the form of training and designing curricular content ranging from ECE to secondary education.

Here they share the resources they have developed to equip educators, parents, and other caregivers with the necessary tools and knowledge to foster cognitive development and school readiness in young children.

These resources and TLMs have been developed to enable ECCE educators,

caregivers and researchers to create learning opportunities for early childhood care and education. You can access all the documents cited in this article [here](#).

Empowering early childhood education and fostering social and cognitive readiness for school success:

The India Early Childhood Education Impact Study Policy Brief ([Policy Brief](#)) sheds light on the school readiness levels of 5-year-old children, which are significantly below expected standards.

Insufficient availability of high-quality early childhood care and education programs has resulted in children entering primary schools ill-prepared in terms of cognitive abilities, pre-literacy skills, and numeracy skills. This makes it challenging for them to cope with the primary school curriculum.

The study specifically examined cognitive skills such as sequential thinking, pre-number concepts, spatial concepts, and number matching. To address this issue, the Policy Brief shares an emerging model of early childhood education that focuses on two crucial aspects: social and personal readiness for school adjustment, and cognitive readiness for language and mathematics learning.

In this section, we will delve into the resources developed by Vikramshila to support the social and cognitive readiness of children aged 3 to 6 years. These resources are categorized into two main sections: resources for early childhood educators and resources for parents/caregivers.



A. Resources for early childhood educators

ECCE activity calendar: When implementing preschool programs in Anganwadis, primary schools, or community learning centres, the first resource developed is a daily and weekly plan of activities for the centre or classroom, spanning 30-52 weeks. These plans incorporate an instructional design aligned with specific domains and learning outcomes for each day of the week. The design includes opportunities for play-based activities (individual and group), free play, and guided activities, which form the conceptual foundation for the development of language, mathematics, and school readiness competencies. These calendars can be either thematic or non-thematic.

An illustrative example is the ECCE calendar from Uttar Pradesh, which consists of 52 weeks and is aligned with the state curriculum and its themes. The calendar includes age-appropriate themes around which a variety of activities are planned

across different domains, all mapped to specific learning outcomes. The themes covered include 'Me and my family,' 'Trees and shrubs,' 'Animals and birds,' 'Fruits and vegetables,' 'Our helpers,' 'Modes of transport,' 'Water,' 'Seasons,' and 'Festivals and events.'

Additionally, the calendar incorporates 12-16 weeks dedicated to revisiting activities from previous weeks throughout the year. You can access the ECCE calendar resource on the ICDS website of the Bal Vikas Seva Evam Pustahar Vibhag, Government of Uttar Pradesh, [here](#).

ECCE educator manual: To assist ECCE educators in effectively organizing the preschool program and implementing the weekly calendar and daily routine, a comprehensive guideline manual is developed. An example of such a manual is the Anganwadi Karyakartri ECCE manual. It aligns with the previously shared calendar. It has been developed in collaboration with the state government and UNICEF.

Typically, the ECCE educator's manual consists of two separate sections. The first section provides educators with knowledge and guidance on various aspects. These include the domains of development, daily routines, annual activity calendar, utilization of the preschool kit, creating teaching-learning materials (TLMs). The section also includes guidelines for the academic calendar of the ECCE centre. These guidelines pertain to aspects such as conducting parent-teacher meetings, organizing birthday celebrations, arranging short tours/trips, celebrating events and festivals, and utilizing the library.

The second section offers guidelines and instructions for effectively implementing the daily instructional design. It covers organizing activities for different age groups, 3+, 4+, and 5+. These relate to language development, cognitive development, art and craft,

indoor and outdoor activities for physical development, and school readiness activities for children aged 5-6 years. The manual includes illustrations of TLMs, examples of conducted activities, step-by-step photos to simplify TLM creation, ideas for seating arrangements, classroom organization, and more.

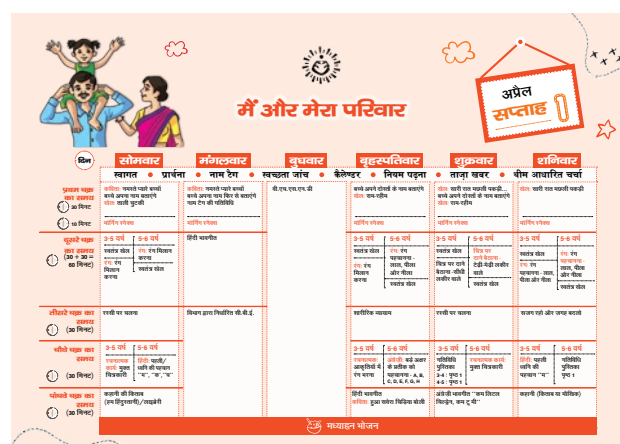
You can access the ECCE Educator Manual on the ICDS website of the Bal Vikas Seva Evam Pustahar Vibhag, Government of Uttar Pradesh, [here](#).

Teacher guide and student activity books to support school readiness: The National Education Policy and its corresponding NIPUN Bharat guidelines emphasize the significance of play-based pre-school programs for cognitive readiness, enabling a smooth transition to primary schools. However, due to the vast and complex systemic constraints, not all children start primary school on an equal footing. To facilitate a seamless entry into primary schools, state governments have adopted NCERT's Vidya Pravesh package. This includes a three-month school readiness program focusing on cognitive readiness for language and numeracy skills.

Vikramshila has provided support to the states of Maharashtra and Rajasthan in implementing this program. We share the resource links for the school readiness Teacher Guide and Student Workbook for [Maharashtra here](#) and for [Rajasthan here](#).

Capacity building course on early childhood education: In collaboration with Wipro Foundation, Vikramshila has developed a comprehensive digital course on ECE. This course utilizes a blended learning approach, combining online modules, face-to-face sessions, and site-based support. It consists of three distinct phases:

Phase 1: (Synchronous) - This phase focuses on the theoretical perspective of ECE. Participants engage in a 10-hour module on a



learning management system (LMS) platform. The module includes lecture videos, readings, self-assessments, and discussion forums. After each assignment, participants receive feedback to deepen their understanding.

Phase 2: (Face-to-Face) - During this phase, the emphasis is on applying theory into practice through developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). Participants work under the guidance of facilitators to develop domain-based instructional plans and create necessary teaching-learning materials (TLMs).

Phase 3: (Onsite Support) - In this phase, facilitators visit the program sites where participants work to provide onsite support and mentoring. They base their guidance on classroom observations and offer assistance accordingly.

The course is designed to familiarize participants with important aspects of early childhood education, taking into account recent research in neurosciences, economics and human development. It is presented in a bilingual format, with presentation slides and reading materials in English, and lectures and discussions conducted in Hindi. For more details about the course, please refer to the links [here](#).

By participating in this course, educators can enhance their knowledge and skills in ECE, incorporating the latest research and best practices into their teaching approach.

B. Parent support resources

These resources have been developed in alignment with the Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development. The framework, available at <https://nurturing-care.org/>, emphasizes the importance of early learning opportunities and responsive caregiving as two of the five core components of nurturing care. The other components include good health, adequate nutrition, and security and safety.

Home-based learning resources: During the pandemic, when preschool centres were closed across India, it became crucial to ensure continued learning at home, integrated into daily life activities. These activities were designed to promote cognitive development, language skills, and fine and gross motor skills.

These also incorporated social and emotional learning throughout. The activities were simple and encouraged continued learning at home. They used readily available resources such as bowls, buttons, spoons, boxes, balls, mirrors, locks and keys. We provide some examples of such home-based learning resources below.

West Bengal: 'Bari Boshe Mojar Kaaj' - In West Bengal, the calendar was supplemented with a set of written and audio instructions on how to conduct each activity. The package also included audio stories and rhymes. The resources proved to be beneficial in supporting parents' engagement in their children's learning and development, even when the preschool centres resumed their operations. Recognizing the positive impact and the continued demand from parents, the distribution of the package was extended.

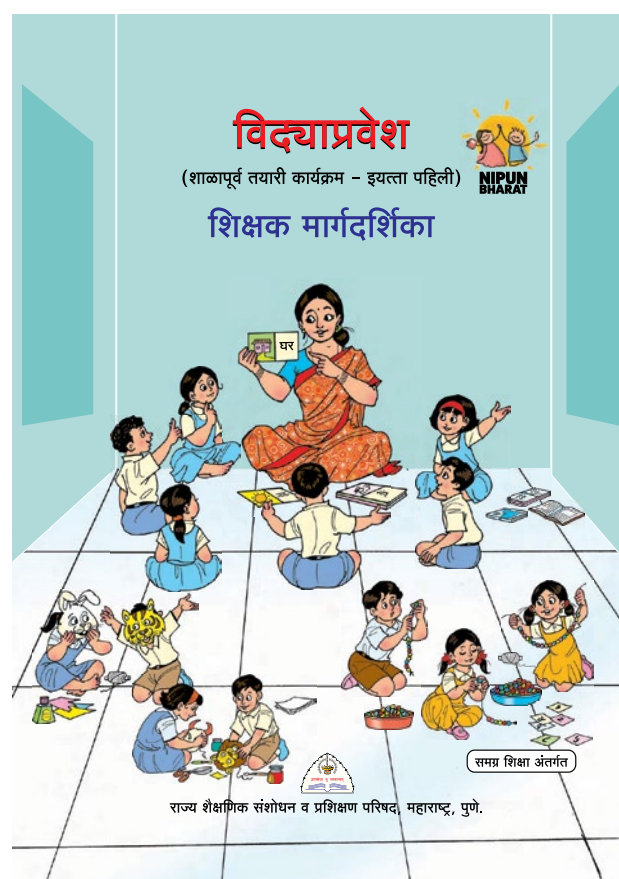
Uttar Pradesh: Balpitara - As a technical partner to UNICEF and the Uttar Pradesh government, Vikramshila developed home learning resources for children. These resources included a 32-week calendar with

384 developmentally and age-appropriate activities, along with 32 stories and 32 rhymes. The Bal Vikas Sewa Evam Pustahar Vibhag, Uttar Pradesh (ICDS) developed an application that encompasses all the calendars and audio-visual resources. The application is available for download on the Google Play Store free of charge. Here's [the relevant link](#).

Responsive care and parenting resources:

Many parents are busy with work and household chores. They generally leave children to their own devices. Parents are often unable to engage in conversations or behaviours that fostered parent-child bonding, such as playing together, sharing stories from one's childhood, hugging, telling jokes, and more.

According to the guidelines of the Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development, these interactions promote emotional bonding. They also help young children understand the world around



Resources for responsive parenting

In Assam, parenting education materials such as the Varnamala Chart and two parenting posters have been adapted from UNICEF's 'Parvarish Ke Champion.' Additionally, advocacy videos on responsive parenting for parents and caregivers have been translated from UNICEF's 'Parvarish Ke Champion.' Here are the links to these resources:

- [Parvarish Ke Champion Varnamala](#)
- [Parvarish Ke Champion Poster for parents and caregiver of children 3 to 6 years old: UNICEF IEC eWarehouse](#)
- [Advocacy Videos Responsive Care and Parenting](#)

These resources aim to support parents and caregivers in providing responsive care and nurturing environments for young children. They also have the goal of fostering their overall development and well-being.

them. These help children learn about relationships, language, and people, and stimulate brain connections as well. Responsive caregiving involves observing and responding to children's movements, sounds, gestures and verbal requests. It forms the basis for protecting children from harm and the negative effects of adversity, recognizing and addressing illness. This can promote enriched learning, and building trust and social relationships. The resources by Vikramshila shared in the article are prepared with the aim to equip educators, parents and caregivers with the necessary tools and knowledge to foster cognitive development and school readiness in young children. By utilizing these resources, early childhood educators and caregivers can create a conducive learning environment that nurtures

the cognitive abilities of young children essential for a successful transition into primary school.

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Keeping wonder alive

Shafia Parveen

Forty-two-year-old Samim Ahmed showed his three-year-old daughter the rotary dial telephone. He told her that it helped people communicate in the past. The little girl held the heavy handset in her hand. She looked at it and asked how one played games on it. Ahmed smiled and said that games couldn't be played on it. The phone was used only for communication. Little Aaliya immediately returned the phone to her father and said, "Boring!" Although the internet is considered one of the greatest inventions ever, it has contributed to the erosion of curiosity — the essence of progress — in children and adults. Children are born curious. They use all their senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight to explore the world. As children investigate, the experiences fuel emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and ethical development. And curious children grow up to be humans interested in asking whys and hungry for knowledge.

A page out of a notebook belonging to famous artist and inventor Leonardo Da Vinci reveals a to-do list of wide-ranging interests. Most of these require going and speaking to a person, or trying something out to see what might happen. But with increased usage of phones in the early years, a child's sense of wonder and curiosity and the need to explore to quench the thirst for knowledge is being replaced by a sense of transaction. Everything is just a click away. This habit adversely affects the child. It makes the process of adjusting to society and its systems, which cannot be navigated by a mere click of a button, more complex. Several organizations invested in early childhood education are taking up more activities to keep the children's sense of wonder and curiosity intact.

Chhattisgarh's Dhamtari district-based organization **Avaniti Education and Training Foundation** has been working with children, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to promote a quality learning environment for children in their early age groups (3 to 8 years). Avaniti works on cultivating curiosity by taking up group and field activities and developing sustainable TLM specific to the learner's context and culture (especially to the tribal culture and knowledge). Assam's Guwahati-based **North East Educational Trust (NEET)** works with children, communities, educators and schools. The goal is to foster a learning environment that encourages critical thinking and creative expression among children through a variety of indoor and outdoor activities. Kolkata-based **Vikramshila Education Resource Society**, which works across several states, including Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, believes in children's autonomy. It believes that as children become more independent, they explore the world on their own and discover how to express themselves.

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Children play in sand in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh, in April 2023.

Avaniti Education and Training Foundation

 Chhattisgarh



Tea party: Children participate in a group activity in Chandanpur, Bastar district, on October 31, 2022. Under the supervision of Krishna Puri and Ashwini Patil, founders of the organization, they made tea. They also made cups out of leaves.



Children explore height and balance on the 'bhootwala tree' in Banbagaud, Dhamtari District, on November 9, 2022.

Vikramshila Education Resource Society **Chhattisgarh**

Posham Pa Bhai Posham Pa: Children play 'Posham Pa Bhai Posham Pa' in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. The game is also known as 'Hill and Tunnel and London Bridge.' The popular outdoor game is often played to teach children traditional songs and help them move to rhythm.

Playing house: The photo taken at an Anganwadi Centre in Bijapur in April 2023 shows a child roleplaying as a mother and soothing her doll. Developmental psychologists believe that young children can learn quickly through their extraordinary ability to imitate.



Vikramshila Education Resource Society

 **Jharkhand**

Weighty affairs: children engaged in a 'sink and float' experiment at Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, in April 2023.



North East Educational Trust (NEET)

 **Assam**



Free Play: A child engages in outdoor activity at the NEET Community Library in Guwahati, Assam, in November 2022. Free play helps children improve their creativity and motor skills.

Photo credits: Avaniti Education and Training Foundation, North East Educational Trust (NEET) and Vikramshila Education Resource Society

Against the odds

Vaishali Kotecha and Ria Banerjee

Imagine a world where the ideals of John Lennon's classic 'Imagine' become more than just lyrics – where inclusion stands as the foundation of our collective existence¹. Amidst the resounding declarations found in documents, manifestos, and policies worldwide, acknowledging the indispensable role of inclusion in shaping an equitable and peaceful world, an important question that seeks our attention is: How inclusive are we actually in our everyday lives?

In this section, let us look at how organizations across the country are thriving to make quality ECCE available to those who are easily excluded. These organizations are rising above the challenges to ensure equal access and opportunities for children who are often overlooked owing to the difficult

circumstances that they have to endure including socioeconomic disadvantages, language or cultural barriers, physical or cognitive impairments, as well as challenging geographical and weather conditions.

Illuminating futures

Established in 2017, Vision Empower (VE) is a charitable trust that was started to make senior grade-level science and mathematics education available to children with visual impairments. Vidhya, one of the co-founders of VE is the first blind student to study math at the higher secondary level in Karnataka and the first blind student to pursue a computer science major at the university level. However, upon graduating, Vidhya faced difficulties in securing an appropriate job



Vision Empower

Tactile Braille sudoku

due to lack of STEM (Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics) knowledge. VE was thus founded by like minded individuals who felt strongly about the lack of equitable access to STEM education for the visually impaired, and about the use of technology for designing inclusive solutions. This was also backed by the findings of the thorough problem-analysis research conducted by the team, which pointed at the lack of accessible content, lack of adequately trained teachers, and lack of affordable assistive technologies available to children with disabilities, especially, visual impairment.

Over the years, VE has placed a strong emphasis on developing effective solutions to help blind students grasp math and science concepts. As a first step, tactile diagrams and 3D models which are well-known effective approaches used to teach children with visual impairments were developed. Next, since most of the teachers of the visually impaired also have similar impairment and find themselves in difficult positions of overcoming twice the challenge, the organization focused on the capacity building of the teachers. Then, VE began to create games and play tools that teach computational thinking skills to students.

Eventually, VE stepped into the digital literacy realm and started conducting research on assistive technologies for education. All of these approaches taken by the organization are research-backed and are planned and implemented with the support of various experts.

Initially, VE began working with children attending grades 4 – 6 across nine schools in Karnataka. However, eventually it was realized that children were finding it difficult to grasp even simple concepts. A root cause analysis of this led to the revelation that more often than not, parents of visually impaired children lack awareness on how to help their children appropriately, especially in the early years. Parents focus more on getting their children treated than on their other developmental requirements, which leads to a lack of school-readiness with foundational skills development among the children. Moreover, the programs and services available in the ECE space also are not very inclusive towards children with disabilities. These programs do not pay heed to the lack of incidental learning and are only suited for children with sight.

So even if the parents are aware, they lack resources that are required for their child's appropriate and equitable development. The

Revolution through innovation

Using the technical expertise of its team, and that with the support of other experts, Vision Empower has jointly built a technological solution called Hexis-Antara which combines an electronic Braille book reader called Hexis with an accessible content management platform called Antara.

This innovative solution converts content in any vernacular language to Braille instantly, allowing for on-demand accessibility. Whether it's books, school notes, or multiple-choice-question assessments, Hexis-Antara aims to foster a love for learning in the reader while eliminating the expensive and time-consuming process of printing Braille books. Hexis, specifically designed for students, operates on battery power, and can be used for 5-6 days without needing to be recharged.

By utilizing the Antara platform, caregivers can easily generate and share content with the Hexis reader, making educational resources more accessible to students. Additionally, they can monitor their child's progress through the analytics provided by the Antara Platform, thus democratizing access to educational content.

delay in the desired cognitive capabilities, lack of motor skills, and the time lost in cluelessness puts the children in a place of disadvantage and the lag keeps on increasing as they progress through grades. In fact, learning of Braille also starts late due to the lack of a strong foundation, which is one of the most important sources of learning and accessibility for visually impaired people.

Realizing these and understanding the need for filling these gaps, VE has created an accessible ECE program to help children to be at par with their sighted peers in the school going age group. Supriya, co-founder and managing trustee, VE, shares that it is important to start working with visually impaired children from the time of birth. She says that, “As a strategy, we focus on replacing visual learning with other sensory means of learning such as touch, hearing, and smell.”

Currently, the ECE program of VE is in the pilot phase where activities are being designed for the 3-6 age group in the following areas of development: fine motor and gross motor skills, cognitive, language, socialization, vision, compensatory, and self-help. Just like the other focus areas and solutions designed by VE, the ECE program too is aligned with various national and international best practices and recommendations such as the Pratham Balwadi Manual, the Expanded Core Curriculum, and the Oregon Project Guidelines.

Supriya shares that, “To overcome the challenges of lack of incidental learning, children are deliberately introduced to the contextual information in which they reside through verbal descriptions.” Pictures and diagrams are also replaced with tactile versions along with pre-created alternative texts to describe the visual representation at the comprehension level of the child. Through these effective strategies, VE hopes to strengthen the foundational skills that will be required by the visually impaired children to

grasp higher grade knowledge with ease, so that their future opportunities are at par with their sighted peers.

It is VE's belief that children with visual impairment or other disabilities, have equal potential but need accommodations, accessible teaching methods, and artifacts. For this, the educator must also be empowered to understand a child's specific disability and to use multi-sensory teaching methods and materials that are accessible specifically to the child.

With its ground-breaking yet viable solutions, VE is trying to change the education landscape for visually impaired children one step at a time. The team at VE urges various actors including the government, the schools, and other educational organizations to create educational content and program design which is inherently inclusive. For this, they suggest that efforts should be made to include children with disabilities in mainstream education, providing necessary support, while raising awareness about their capabilities and ensuring equal opportunities in subject choices. Emphasizing empowerment through knowledge and experiential learning rather than solely meeting basic needs will further enhance inclusive education efforts.

Similar to how Vision Empower was created with support from Vidhya, it would be beneficial to also include people with disabilities in the dialogues related to providing services for them. It is only after understanding their experiences and needs comprehensively that solutions can be made inherently and impactfully inclusive!

Of resilience and hope

In the early 2000s, a group of social work students formed the Jammu & Kashmir Association of Social Workers (JKASW) to bring positive change into the lives of marginalized communities in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). They aimed to utilize their

professional skills and involve young individuals in public institutions to create a better future for vulnerable communities. JKASW was officially registered as a public charitable trust in 2006, symbolizing their belief in the power of collective efforts and professionalism through their logo, which represents the core idea of “Together We Can.”

JKASW adopts a multi-pronged approach to address the multidimensional issues faced by children. They work in areas such as Child Education, Child Protection, Advocacy, and Adolescent Engagement, and Health & Hygiene. By engaging with various stakeholders, including grassroots communities, government, and non-government organizations, JKASW fosters linkages and advocates for policy changes. In their education program, they focus on Early Childhood Education (ECE), Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Out of School Children (OoSC), Supplementary Learning and School Transformation. Their reach extends across the entire union territory (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), with direct outreach to over 105,000 children in 11 districts and systemic-level interventions benefiting over 6 lakh children across the UT.

Working in the Jammu & Kashmir region poses significant challenges due to recurring instability caused by politics, conflict, and unfavourable weather conditions. These disruptions in schools result in learning loss, knowledge gaps, and hindered academic

progress, especially for children aged 3-6. Disruptions during this critical stage affects lifelong development, including social and emotional growth. Consequently, there is a concerning rate of dropouts, with over 93,000 children between 6 to 18 years found out of school in 2022, according to the ongoing ‘Talaash’ survey conducted by the Department of Education, Jammu & Kashmir. Research highlights that weak foundational skills and a lack of relatability with learning content contribute to these dropouts. Moreover, educators also face persistent challenges that lead to demotivation, as they constantly need to adapt teaching methods, navigate disruptions, and address the emotional well-being of students amidst chaotic circumstances. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, textbook shortages, limited internet connectivity, and restricted access to technology further hamper the availability of educational resources, impacting the overall learning experience for both teachers and students.

The team at JKASW works tirelessly to address these challenges in a holistic and sustainable manner. For this, a very strong focus is laid upon strengthening the ECCE program, such that the foundational level is fortified for the children, and they are able to retain their interests, and learning levels through the higher grades. The work in the ECCE program is done at both the ground level as well as the systemic level.

JKASW has been actively providing technical expertise and support to the ICDS department. They have reviewed and aligned the ‘Nanhe Kadam’ ECCE curriculum with NEP 2020, ensuring its compliance and effectiveness at the UT level. Alongside this, JKASW has conducted capacity building programs for master trainers, equipping them with the necessary skills to effectively implement the curriculum and address learning gaps resulting from regional instability. The training goes beyond



curriculum orientation, focusing on drawing solutions from policy recommendations and frameworks. Trainers receive hands-on, experiential training to enhance their understanding of how to deliver the curriculum in the field. In addition to these initiatives, JKASW has developed age-appropriate activity books to complement the curriculum and has provided support for the launch and implementation of UNICEF's UniLearn ECCE E-learning course. These comprehensive efforts by JKASW benefit both the enrolled children and the functionaries involved in early childhood education in Jammu and Kashmir, aiming to improve the overall quality of education and bridge learning gaps in the region.

Working intensively with 1,252 AWCs and 25 Government preprimary schools for ECCE, JKASW has witnessed a remarkable shift in the educational landscape. Ambreen Bashir, State Resource Person - ECCE, JKASW, highlights the transformation, stating, "Earlier, AWCs operated for just an hour each day for nutrition purposes, lacking any form of educational activities. But now, even when nutritional supply is unavailable, parents send their children with tiffins from home to ensure consistent learning." This attitudinal shift among parents showcases the positive impact of JKASW's intervention, fostering increased parental engagement and support for their children's education.

However, the situation before the beginning of JKASW's ECCE intervention was extremely daunting. The first challenge faced by the organization was to bring the AWCs to a better shape to inspire learning. These centres had long been neglected and the infrastructure was deteriorating by the day. The next step was to inspire caregivers, including Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and parents, about the importance of early childhood development and the consequences of neglecting it. To achieve this, the organization formed Anganwadi

Support Groups with participation from the local communities. These groups were trained to mobilize the entire community, ensure regular attendance of all children in classes, and raise awareness about the significance of ECCE. AWWs received comprehensive training to enhance their technical and soft skills, enabling them to meet children's needs effectively. The organization also prioritizes regular resource development to maintain a diverse and up-to-date repertoire of teaching materials and tools.

JKASW has dedicated itself towards providing a semblance of stability in the domain of education. For instance, following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the state witnessed a wave of protests, which led to the shutdown of schools and colleges. This situation worsened once the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country and lockdown was imposed. To ensure continuity in learning during the lockdown, JKASW developed a digital home-based learning package that prioritized children's social and emotional development. These activities incorporated local songs and rhymes and could be done using materials readily available at home. Home visits were conducted to address the challenge posed by the lack of smartphones in many households, providing demonstrations and engaging children in play-based activities. These visits not only engaged the children socially and emotionally, but also acted as demonstrations for parents.

Another initiative, the Anganshala Home-Based Learning Program, delivered tailored learning packages to preprimary children through Education Fellows recruited from local communities. The program reached over 11,000 children across 1,050 focus areas. Additionally, as AWCs reopened, play-based transitional learning was provided for children coming to AWCs for the first time ever, and a three-month school readiness program, Vidya Pravesh – under the aegis of

the NIPUN Bharat Mission, was implemented for children directly entering schools, without any AWC-learning. By adapting activities to home environments, conducting home visits, and implementing specialized programs, JKASW has demonstrated a strong commitment to sustaining learning and supporting the holistic development of children. The organization has not just been successful in mobilizing the AWWs to perform better but has also done the same with parents. Even after the AWCs' reopening, the parents are interested in being included in the developmental process for their children and are requesting resources for the same.

In a region fraught with challenges, where it would be all too easy to overlook the needs of children amidst the myriad difficulties, JKASW stands tall as a champion for their cause. With unwavering commitment, they choose to fight for these children, recognizing their worth and including them in a vision for a better future. By focusing on ECCE, they set the stage for lifelong learning, empowering children with the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to succeed academically and personally. JKASW's perseverance, adaptability, and determination proves that education not only survives but thrives even in the most adverse circumstances.

To breathe freely

'To breathe freely' is the meaning of the word 'Avaniti', also the name of an organization based in the Dhamtari district of the Chhattisgarh state, working towards enabling the meaning of this word for the people they are working for. The organization is engaging with the government's early education system, with an aim of making quality early learning available to children, especially those coming from the disadvantaged sections and tribal communities. The organization defines its vision as - "A society where every child's voice and ways of learning are respected".

Avaniti is currently working with a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Kamar tribe who are nestled along the foothills and deep forests of southern Chhattisgarh. The Kamar people have a rich cultural heritage and are known for their distinct traditions, shifting cultivation practices and basketry work. However, despite being the original inhabitants of the region, in recent years, the Kamar tribe has faced various socio-economic challenges, including access to basic fundamental rights, such as healthcare, education, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

When Avaniti began working in 2018, there were no Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in any of the Kamar dominated villages, and any form of government or private ECCE services had been missing for generations. In fact, to date there are no AWCs in these villages. As for primary schools, the access is also very limited especially for the children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Naturally, the dropout rate among children from the Kamar community is as high as >90% and happens as early as in the 6th grade.

To address these issues, Avaniti initiated work with the Kamar community with an approach that involves children in their learning, and to provide a supportive environment for them to freely express themselves. The organization's first step was to build a comfort zone and trust with the community, given that the general treatment that they get from society is more often than not, quite hostile. Krishna and Ashwini, Co-founders of Avaniti share, "It was of the utmost importance for us to build a relationship of trust, and we did so by respecting them and their cultures, by having curiosity to know about their practices... We partake in their cultural activities and celebrations, we normalize their food habits - things that they are looked down upon for by the outside world."

In terms of the programs, the first program started by Avaniti is called 'Phoolbati', which focuses on the issue of access. It is named so after the first and the only girl from the community who managed to study up to the 12th standard. This program is implemented in collaboration with various important stakeholders including the community, the primary school, the gram panchayats, etc. to empower the community and make them aware about the need, and importance of education, through community-based interventions. For this, Avaniti has established community-owned learning centres in villages that are deprived of any kind of preschool, including government anganwadis. Through such an intervention, the community is eventually empowered to take charge and advocate for their own rights – to ask for AWCs and schools to be set up in their villages to start with. In just three-four years, the Phoolbati Program has ignited a spark, and an AWC has already been sanctioned for one of the villages while conversations on others have started between the stakeholders.

The second program is called 'Ujood', which means – a new ray in the Kamari language - one which is unfortunately on the verge of extinction. The focus of this program is to strengthen the existing AWCs since even till day, the orientation of many AWWs about an AWC is it being limited to a nutrition centre, and the ECCE component is almost completely missing. This means that the children do not have the desired cognitive, social, and emotional and physical developmental skills. This was highlighted in the ASER 2019 'Early Years' report which stated that >30% children within the early age group lack these skills. In order to change this environment, the Ujood Program focuses on the capacity building of ICDS functionaries, wherein the first and most important step is to work on changing the perceptions of the teacher towards a child – how they look at a child, and their thoughts on a child's



Avaniti

capabilities. This is done with the belief that it's only once the perception improves that the pedagogy improves too.

All of Avaniti's efforts, as stated above, are built around the child-led idea of learning, and therefore, all the projects follow context-based and child-led learning (CBCL) approach. This means that all curriculum and pedagogy is designed by asking the children what they want to learn. The TLMs are also made in a contextual manner, using locally available materials, which are often made by the children themselves. Another guiding factor for all the projects is to bring in the contexts of each of the various communities within the tribe. Unfortunately, there do not exist many books or reference materials aligned to these contexts, and therefore, Avaniti has taken up the mammoth task of recording these experiences in the form of stories to create books out of them.

Krishna and Ashwini explain, "If TLMs and reference materials are not contextually relevant, the Anganwadi teachers mostly do not understand what to do with them, and

the children are also unable to respond to them, which defeats the purpose of learning. It is noteworthy that the lives and experience of these tribes vary across the settlements, and so even a Chhattisgarh-based general context also does not have much relevance.”

This approach has also helped Avani mobilize the entire community and create a momentum wherein everyone participates in identifying and creating learning resources for children, making learning more contextual and fun for children. Such an approach of taking each community's unique experience and context into account not only makes learning relevant but can also help create an archive of sorts which would help generations of learners as well as prevent extinction of a unique and rich culture.

It is interesting to understand how Avani came up with their action plan. The idea for the organization was to first conduct a unique participatory needs-analysis where children themselves are interviewed thoroughly, among other stakeholders. These were primary-level children, ones who had missed out completely on AWC-level learning and went straight into schools but had dropped out very early.

When asked about the reason for dropping out, the most common responses were about the kind of ill-treatment they received from their peers and sometimes teachers on the pretext of their cultural habits and practices, the long distances they had to travel to get to schools, and the fact that they would not really understand what was being taught. Following this, the children were asked what kind of schooling they want, for which the responses were around wanting to learn through play, and to have centres of learning closer to their homes. In fact, some children also expressed their longing to visit an anganwadi and play, as they have never had the opportunity to do so due to the absence of anganwadis in their village. Taking these into account, Avani designed the Phoolbati and Ujood programs.

When the first batch of children from the two community-owned learning centres located in two villages supported by Avani went to primary school, they met the teachers to understand if they could see any difference, given that the children prior to this batch had not received any formal ECE training. While the teacher could not pinpoint it, they said that these children were ‘different’ in comparison with the previous batches.

The team at Avani has noticed changes among the children in terms of their confidence levels, the children talk confidently, they ask questions, they ask questions to their school teacher, and especially, the dramatic improvement of the socio-emotional skills, which has been much beyond their expectations.

Avani encounters a multitude of challenges despite their remarkable impact on the ground. First, due to the community's heavy reliance on forests, children often accompany their families for days in search of resources. This disrupts their learning and hampers the momentum that is created after months of effort.

Second, the absence of full-fledged AWCs in the region results in inadequate nutrition, directly impeding the children's developmental progress. Then, as mentioned previously, due to the dearth of resources available in the Kamari language, the outreach of the organization becomes limited. It is also difficult for the organization to find people from within the local community to join their programs. Since the Kamar population is quite dispersed geographically without any mobile network coverage and the AWCs are too far off, it becomes difficult to access the centres frequently, especially during the months experiencing heavy monsoon.

Moreover, the government's disproportionate emphasis on the nutrition aspect of the AWCs, rather than ECCE, presents a hurdle

for organizations like Avaniti to sustain their efforts, and benefit from any systemic-level inputs and efforts towards improving the quality of early learning. And most importantly, the biggest challenge the organization faces is towards shifting the perception of the teachers, to make them think beyond the traditional methods of teaching where punishment is seen as key toward making children learn. Avaniti believes that in order for any organization to achieve significant progress, regardless of their field or location, it is crucial to avoid a standardized approach and instead prioritize understanding the unique context and seeking alternative solutions. Krishna and Ashwini emphasize the importance of patience, recognizing that meaningful changes require time, and staying committed to one's philosophy and chosen path without frequent deviations.

Avaniti's work with the Kamar tribe is a beacon of hope and inclusion. By respecting the tribe's cultural heritage and empowering children to express themselves, Avaniti is creating an environment where every voice is valued. Their child-led approach provides quality education while fostering a sense of belonging. Avaniti inspires us to imagine a future where all children have equal opportunities to thrive and breathe freely.

Conclusion

In this exploration, we have witnessed the unwavering commitment of organizations across the country striving to provide quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to marginalized children who often face numerous obstacles. By overcoming various challenges and barriers, these organizations are striving to ensure equal access and opportunities for all children, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Their tireless efforts serve as an inspiration and a call to action for us to prioritize inclusion in our society. By embracing diversity, breaking down barriers, and

fostering equitable educational opportunities, we can create a future where every individual is valued and empowered. Let us join hands in championing inclusive education and building a world where the ideals of inclusivity and equal access to education become a tangible reality for all children, regardless of their background or circumstances.

End Notes

1. 'Imagine' by John Lennon envisions a world of inclusivity, where all individuals, regardless of their differences, are embraced and valued. It encourages us to imagine a society that promotes equality, understanding, and acceptance, where everyone is included and respected, breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for all.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in the story at:

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