
**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY
STUDIES IN INDIA**

An Agenda for Research and Policy

Editors

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Current Issues in Early Childhood Care and Education

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A study of ECCE in India today and the insights brought together in the various papers in this section reveal certain striking features of the scenario. Most prominent is the vast gap, in quantitative terms, between the need for ECCE and its availability. In terms of quality, the picture of a characteristically Indian ECCE emerges—over-crowded, didactic, highly verbal, group-oriented and school related. It focuses on cognitive objectives, shows little concern for women's needs or feelings for day care, and silently socializes children to the authoritarian reality of the Indian educational system. Equally striking is the paucity and poor quality of research and the lack of a dynamic interaction between academic leadership and practitioners of ECCE, or an interface between research, policy and program.

The present state of affairs in ECCE cannot be understood in isolation from the malaise which affects the Indian educational system as a whole, or from the sociopolitical context within which development has taken place in the last few decades. This paper is a 'political' look at the current scenario in ECCE and its origins. It attempts to place each of the major issues already identified—extent, nature and scope, gender issues and research interface—within a larger framework, and to illuminate them in that context.

The Dual Track

The deep sickness of the Indian education system is evident in its polarization into two parallel streams of education, one for the rich (the private sector) and one for the poor (the public sector). The dual track in education itself reflects the reality of what has come to be known as the 'two Indias'. As far as ECCE is concerned, the problems are compounded because ECCE remains 'unrecognized' in the private sector.

The pernicious consequences of these two powerful elements—parallel track and 'unrecognized' early education—were foreseen by the Kothari Commission (Government of India, 1964–66), though at that time the cleavage between the parallel tracks was neither as deep nor as obvious as now. The Commission suggested the pattern of 'common schools' to overcome the threat of the dual track, a suggestion which has remained a dead letter to this day. The distance travelled away from the goals of the sixties and the confusion of policy objectives can be gauged from the fact that the National Policy for Education 1986, (while recognizing the need and importance of ECCE and offering a program based on that recognition), departed from the 'common school' concept so far as to promote the totally opposite idea of the Navodaya Vidyalayas (Government of India, 1986a). The intervening years have witnessed the failure to attain universal primary education, with frequent delaying of the target date for its attainment and no sign of the goal in sight, a massive increase in the number of illiterates, of child laborers and of school drop-outs, and the unchecked and unprecedented growth of higher education for the benefit of the privileged few. The hidden hand of the power elites is only too evident in the maintenance of such a skewed educational system that serves the needs of skewed development.

The Perils of Non-Recognition

These are well-known facts. The question is why has ECCE been more deeply affected by this polarization than other sectors. A possible reason is because of the 'unrecognized' nature of Early

Childhood Education in the first (rich) India (mostly serviced by the private sector), or the failure to give legitimacy to the model which is inevitably aped by the public sector, which serves the second India. The lack of a legitimate model has contributed to many of the typical characteristics of ECCE—its quantitative inadequacy and late development, its qualitative emphasis on health and nutrition at the cost of education and day care, its borrowed theoretical base and the lack of sound linkages with academe. All these are intricately interlinked but some of these linkages can be unwrapped for examination.

Inadequate and Inequitable

The slow and uneven growth of Early Childhood Education in the country during the first three quarters of the century can be attributed to the fact that it was left largely to private initiative. Though state funding of ECE went up significantly with the launching of the Balwadi program by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) in the fifties, it was by no means comparable to the rapid expansion of primary education in the years immediately following Independence. In spite of the emphasis placed by the Kothari Commission on preprimary education, little progress was made in that field. It was not till the launching of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in the seventies that large numbers of young children aged three to six began to have access to some form of ECCE (Government of India, 1976).

From the beginning, the ICDS has placed heavy emphasis on the health and nutrition aspects of child development, to the neglect of cognitive development, language skills, and indeed of holistic child development. Even today, the poor adult-child ratio and large group size in Anganwadis, the low emphasis on training in educational and developmental aspects, and the scant attention paid to materials and approaches to promote cognitive and holistic development are characteristic of the ICDS. Resource constraints no doubt play a major role in this outcome, but the perception of priorities is also important. A powerful influence has been the 'survival before development' school of thought, forcefully enunciated by

UNICEF and others who paid the piper to play the tune accordingly. It is also more than possible that planners and policymakers were negatively influenced by the currently available models of 'pre-school education' in the private sector, which they rightly perceived as irrelevant for the majority of India's children.

The Power of the Invisible

What, then, is the prevailing model in the private sector? It is hard to generalize, because little systematic information is available about this 'unrecognized' though influential sector. It is not even clear how many institutions exist, whether known as nursery, KG, preprimary, Montessori, convent school or by some other name. A rough estimate is that there may be half a lakh to one lakh (or even more) such institutions, catering to 60 to 70 lakh children of the middle class (or aspiring middle class). Ironically enough, a roughly similar number of children is catered to by programs in the public sector. So there are two distinct universes of preschool education in the country *of about the same size*, but one caters to 150 million people and the other to 700 million.

While there are several outstanding examples in the private sector of well-organized preprimary institutions working on sound theoretical principles, the majority of them, unfortunately, are little more than 'teaching shops' aiming to prepare children for entry into the formal educational system. As only a handful of training courses or institutions exist, and as there are no regulations about the employment of qualified staff, no licensing, inspection or controls, most of the teachers in these institutions are 'untrained' or have irrelevant qualifications. Thus, in urban centers, graduates are often found teaching in such schools, and many even have training to teach higher grades, though this is often counter-productive. But most of the 'teachers' in this sector have little or no orientation to child education or child development as such, and little hope of acquiring such knowledge. In addition, since no standards of pay are laid down, most of these teachers are paid an exploitative wage but can do nothing about it.

Curriculum and Training

Managements of ECCE institutions on the whole tend to be equally ignorant of recent advances in child development or pedagogies related to young children. Most of those running such institutions are unaware of current knowledge about how children learn, the role of play in development, the interrelationships of domains of development and other basic concepts of child education. That *early introduction of formal learning is not only useless but may be positively detrimental to young children*, is still an enigma to people, who have no theoretical base on which to build curriculum. As a result, curriculum tends to be confined to rote memorization, early and unsystematic introduction to the three R's, and to English, using group teaching methods which are highly didactic, verbal and conformist, and paying little attention to individual development, or to the development of cognitive skills, problem-solving, language, imagination, curiosity, initiative or social skills.

Training programs for preschool teachers, few and far between as they are, mostly tend to be very old-fashioned, based on theories of the first half of the century. The names of Froebel and Montessori, Gandhi and Tagore, who inspired many creative and zestful educators in earlier years, are often heard, but only occasionally does one hear mention of later theories or thinkers like Piaget, the Western cult figure of the sixties and seventies, who has already been overtaken by the post-Piagetian revolution in developmental psychology. Scarcely any mention is made of recent advances in knowledge about the abilities and development of infants from birth to two years of age. With such a weak base, it is no wonder that a sound academic superstructure has not been built. Some strong university departments of Child Development have emerged in the last thirty years, but Early Childhood Education as a discipline is hardly present in Faculties of Education, nor are there strong linkages between post-secondary and higher levels in this discipline.

With such a weak model to emulate, it is no wonder that the public sector has little opportunity to develop sound educational strategies. While ICDS firmly rejects the model, others aspire to imitate it. Yet the so-called 'non-formal preschool education' found in the ICDS turns out in practice to be little more than a vernacular

imitation of the 'English medium convent school' type of instruction. The pressure from both parents and teachers to introduce the study of the English language is a typical example of this 'downward filtration' effect. No amount of research-based information about the pedagogic value of the mother tongue in the early years or about appropriate timing and strategies for introducing a second language can stand up to the social pressures of reality.

Regulate the Unregulated

So intimately are the two sectors linked that, contradictory as it sounds, changes in the content and quality of ECCE in the public sector can come about only when the invisible is made visible, by recognizing, and then going on to regulate and set standards in Early Childhood Education in the private sector, and enforcing these by a system of inspection and control. When the model itself begins to change, and becomes firmly linked to the network of academic relationships, then perhaps curricular reform will be possible, because then there will not only be a reason and a model for change, but an authentic structure and process for implementing it.

Day Care—Not a Women's Issue

Besides the deadening influence of the 'invisible' presence, about which there is a conspiracy of silence, another set of powerful factors, affecting the nature and quality of ECCE, grows out of gender issues. It is significant that ECCE has traditionally been perceived, not as a women's issue, but as something mainly concerning the welfare of children, or as the first step in the educational ladder.

Organizationally, too, ECCE has been linked to the school system, from where it draws its models, inspiration and weaknesses. Neither trade unions (which have never been deeply concerned with women's issues anyway) nor women's organizations have till very recently taken up day care as an issue of critical importance to women. Yet the very survival and development of millions of children are threatened by the 'double disadvantage' of poverty and working mothers. The vast mass of women workers in the unorganized sector, constituting 89 per cent of the workforce (National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women

in Informal Sector, 1988) has remained unheard and unseen. As a result, there has been a very limited growth of day care in the workplace or in the community, and options like family-based care, so popular in other developing countries, have not taken root. Day care in India, where it exists, is still typically an institution-based group activity located in a residential community (Registrar General of India, 1979).

As far as the day care issue is concerned, it is interesting that the stances of all segments of the women's movement, from the traditional service-oriented social welfare agencies, to the party-linked mass organizations, and the autonomous groups of activists and feminists, have been similar. There has not been a big public hue and cry about day care for working women from any section, highlighting once more how difficult it is to get away from the deeply internalized conviction that child care is the woman's, if not specifically the mother's responsibility.

Gender and the Holistic Perspective

But the lack of involvement of women as women has had an impact on more than organization and structure. The very content and nature of ECCE has remained limited as a result. A strong pressure for day care might have enriched ECCE with a more holistic perspective than the present school-related one, and long ago exposed the absurdity of confining children to formal group teaching methods for the entire day. Similarly, if infants had been in day care in large numbers, the inadequacy of formality and group teaching may have been perceived by now. And the irrelevance of present day concepts of desirable adult-child ratios and group size, which are drawn from higher levels of education, might have become apparent, for women concerned with child care at the level of everyday family reality, know only too well the kind of adult response needed to care for children of varying ages.

A more realistic perception of costs would also undoubtedly have resulted. In the absence of such influences, however, the typical Indian ECCE model is a half-day 'center' for a group of children aged three to six, focusing on 'teaching' which means, in practice, preparing them for school. While this is doubtless one of the many possible faces of ECCE, it is a pity that the others have been lost sight of.

Girl's Education—Yet Another Gender Issue

Gender inequity makes itself felt in that, till recently, the link between ECCE and the education of young girls, who are often prevented by their responsibilities of sibling care from attending school, has been neither perceived nor acted upon. Official statistics reveal that more than 60 per cent of girls aged six to 14 are not attending school (Agarwal, 1987). There are obviously multiple reasons for this phenomenon, child care being but one of them. Some studies provide disturbing evidence that rural girls of this age work up to eight hours a day and that three to five hours of this time are used for household chores, including child care. It seems that girls are versatile creatures, too useful to be sent to school (Jain and Banerjee, 1985).

It is both sad and significant that it is impossible to state, from existing information, to what extent girls are missing school because of child care responsibilities (UNICEF, 1990). Excuses are not hard to find and deep-seated gender prejudices are revealed in the common assumption that girls are 'naturally' expected to assist their mothers in child care, and that it helps to prepare them for their future roles as mothers and home-makers. What it does meanwhile to their present chances of education, and the role that ECCE might play as the vital missing link in the chain, are the issues less easily perceived and more easily ignored.

Women Workers in ECCE

Gender rears its ugly head in yet another way in relation to ECCE, and that is, in the marginalization and exploitation of the workers, (almost all of whom are women), who work with young children. Both child care workers in the public sector and so-called 'teachers' in the private sector are customarily paid an outrageously low and exploitative wage, and have little status, social recognition, job security or prospects of advancement. Training is often altogether missing, as pointed out earlier, or is very slight and inadequate, or irrelevant. Lurking behind these phenomena may be yet another gender stereotype, that child care/education comes 'naturally' to women and does not need any specialized training. The downgrading of jobs typically perceived as feminine and the tempting possibilities of a pool of cheap, 'untrained', unorganized, non-mobile

female labor may also lie behind the consistent refusal to 'recognize' Early Childhood Education as an academic field in its own right. The possibility, that ECCE continues to remain unrecognized largely because it is in the female domain, should not be dismissed as far-fetched.

These three issues concerning ECCE—day care, girls' education and the fate of women ECCE workers—illustrate how the course of development is affected by value systems and thought processes reflecting prevailing gender inequities. Perhaps in the Indian context these should be of greater concern than the conventional gender issues of sexism in the preschool curriculum or the numbers of boys and girls attending preschools.

The Interface Question

To conclude, one may consider the reasons for the lack of a developed research-policy-program interface in ECCE. Attention has been drawn separately to the dismal state of research in ECCE, its poor quality, limited quantity and lack of relationship to policy and program. Yet India is not without its shining examples of a positive feedback cycle between research, policy and program in several other fields. Ignoring for the moment the traditional R and D areas like science and technology or agriculture, one may note that nutrition, also a discipline closely connected with children, tells a very different story.

India became one of the first countries in the world to have a nutrition policy when a chapter on nutrition was introduced into the Third Five Year Plan (Government of India, 1961). During the last three decades, there have been a number of nutrition programs on the ground, ranging from simple supplementary feeding programs to highly sophisticated interventions. Many of these have been closely monitored, evaluated, and modified as a result of such evaluations, and some have become famous success stories. The CARE study of school meals as a means of increasing school attendance in the fifties, Project Poshak (Gopaldas, et al., 1975) in the seventies, and the TINP (Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project) in the eighties, are examples which spring instantly to mind. Of all these, the TINP is perhaps the most dazzling example

of a well-designed, carefully monitored, constantly corrected and successful nutrition intervention (Chidambaram, 1989).

The Significance of 'Recognition'

It must be noted that in the corresponding period of three decades, nutrition has emerged as a respectable academic discipline and the requisite academic infrastructure and manpower to sustain this type of interface has been built up. For example, a number of universities and institutions offer courses in nutrition at various levels from paraprofessional to post-graduate; a large cadre of workers with post-graduate qualifications has been created; research departments and institutes have been set up, with the National Institute of Nutrition in the lead; surveys of nutrition have been organized and atlases prepared, and the regular network of the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau has been established. This academic superstructure supports and interacts with the field programs, and provides the academic leadership. All this became possible only because of the 'recognition' and acceptance of nutrition as an important plank of national policy. The rest followed. *It is significant that there has been no such 'recognition' of ECCE at the national level and so, no such infrastructure has grown up.*

Of course, this is an over-simplification and there are other factors to be considered. Nutrition is a hard science, in which easily devised quantitative measures provide the building blocks for the success stories. Child Education and Child Development are uncomfortably 'soft' disciplines, and indicators in these areas are notoriously slippery. Besides, there is no dual track in nutrition—nutrition interventions lie solely within the realm of public policy and are addressed only to the vulnerable sections of society. There are no nutrition interventions for the rich.

Making a Start

The importance of 'recognition' can also be illustrated with reference to the growing research-policy-program interface concerning the

ICDS. A large body of research related to the ICDS is now available as a base for policy changes (NIPCCD, 1989). Most of this research is somewhat narrow in scope and strictly related to defined goals of achieving specific targets. There is a heavy emphasis on health and nutrition, while psychosocial, educational and sociocultural aspects receive much less attention. When these are discussed, it is mostly in terms of program inputs, rather than in terms of expected outcomes in children (Sharma, 1987).

It is significant that no tools have been devised within the ICDS research system to measure behavioral outcomes in children, and that no study has been undertaken in India along the lines of the Cali study, which compared the impact of various types of interventions, nutrition alone, preschool education alone, and integrated intervention programs (McKay and McKay, 1983). It is also noteworthy that even after fifteen years of existence of the ICDS, a longitudinal study of the effects of Early Childhood Education on even a small cohort has yet to be launched. This may point to a lack of confidence in the capability to undertake such studies as well as to lack of faith or interest in the objectives of ECCE. The interface has still to become active.

Conclusions

The major issues and problems of ECCE seem to be disturbingly linked to forces and parameters beyond its scope. Until ECCE is placed within this larger framework, and actions initiated at several levels, only Parkinsonian laws of expansion may operate. No doubt the ICDS will continue to grow till the whole country is covered, providing services of low quality at low efficiency to ever larger numbers; the private sector, if it continues 'unrecognized', will undoubtedly grow to meet the insatiable demand of the middle class, but access to good quality ECCE will remain tantalizingly restricted to a tiny minority, while most of the middle class will pay to be cheated or feel frustrated by what they get.

Day care, girls' education and the status of child care workers will continue to languish, so long as they are treated as fragmented issues unrelated to each other and to the nexus of women's, children's and girl's needs. Signs indicate some likely improvements

in the quality and nature of the interface. But only very radical social and political changes arising from a revolution in values and belief systems can be expected to bring about fundamental changes of direction. Discussing the possibility of such profound change would lead to altogether another story.

Editors' Note. Mina Swaminathan has succinctly presented the key issues and concerns that dominate ECCE in India. These are the issues of recognition of ECCE as a rightful priority; acknowledgement of the influence exerted by 'pre-school models' of the private sector on ECCE in the public sector; the interface between women's work and child care; gender issues; and training needs. In the articles that follow some of these concerns have been singled out for elaboration. For example, Prerana Mohite's article focuses on the linkages between child development research and ECCE, identifying gaps and indicating future directions; the article by Rajalakshmi Muralidharan and Venita Kaul calls attention to the need for carefully formulated policies and judiciously monitored programs in ECCE; and Sukhdeep Gill's article on child care details the changing scene of women's employment, family composition and the consequent need for systematized formal and informal child care support. Two other papers deal with issues/concerns not touched upon in Mina Swaminathan's note. Child welfare in its broad perspective is reviewed by Sindhu Phadke, and perspectives in the education of children with special needs is focused upon by Baljit Kaur and Pratibha Karanth. A common thread of a plea for ecologically valid and sensitive models runs through all the articles in this section.

Early Childhood Care and Education: Emerging Issues in Research

PRERANA MOHITE

The promotion of healthy child development has become a major focus of attention in India over the last decade. This concern is mirrored in a tremendous expansion of the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The term has been used broadly to refer to care and education during infancy, preschool and early primary school years. The centuries old sentimental interest in children's well-being is being replaced by the concept of deliberate planned intervention. With advances in a field, an awareness is needed of how the field emerged, the different circumstances that shaped its course and current needs which dictate the future directions. Research is a strong indicator of such a course, and it is primarily with this aim that the present effort to review the researches in ECCE has been undertaken. Based on the emerging trends in research, substantive and methodological concerns can be delineated. The most important exercise would be to review the linkages between research and policies which, in the final analysis, would determine how 'relevant' a body of research has been. A brief historical overview of the field of ECCE since Independence will serve as an appropriate backdrop against which to review and evaluate researches.

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