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Navtika : Journal of Early Childhood Care and Education is published three times in a year, in January, May and September. It is intended for parents, teachers, teacher-educators, educational administrators, research workers and teacher trainees. The contents include thought provoking articles by distinguished educationists, sharing of innovative practices, teacher's corner, parent's corner, calendar of workshops and conferences, help-line for parents, book reviews and other features pertinent to the field of ECCE.

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The early childhood stage in life is important as a foundation for inculcation of social and personal habits and values, which are known to last a lifetime. What follows logically is the crucial importance of investing in these early years to ensure an enabling environment for every child and thereby, a sound foundation for life, which is not only the right of every child but will also impact, in the long term, on the quality of human capital available to a country.

National Curriculum Framework, 2005, NCERT

Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education A National Perspective

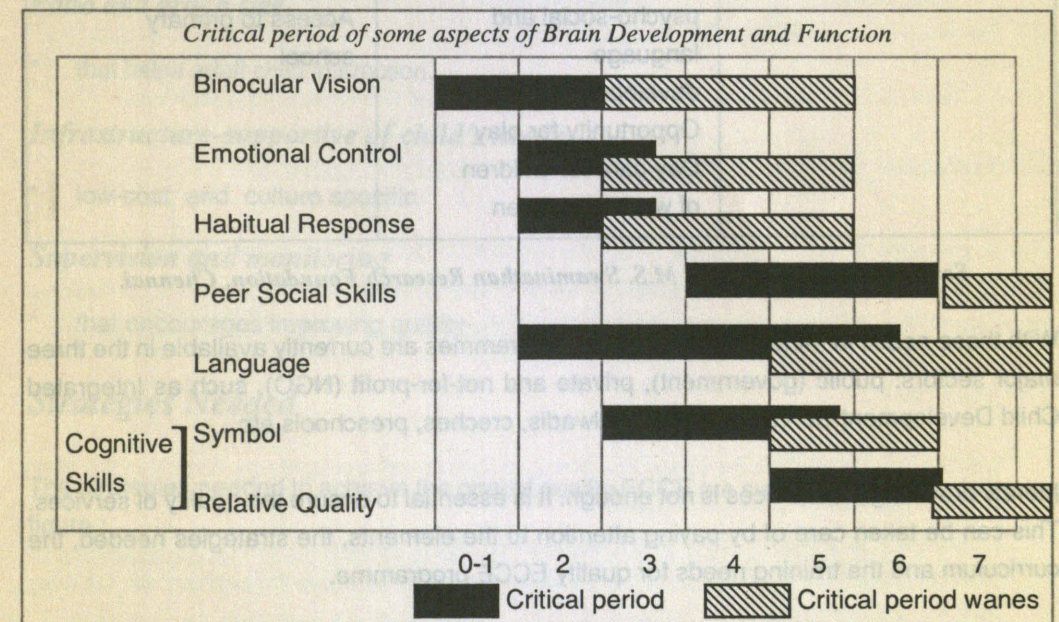
Mina Swaminathan*

Abstract

The National Focus Group (NFG), set up by NCERT for the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) Review in 2004, worked to lay the guidelines to provide quality ECCE services. The current paper throws light on these guidelines.

The first six to eight years of a child's life are the most crucial in terms of lifelong development, since the pace of development is extremely rapid in this period. Not only that, research shows that the early years are the most critical in terms of forming synaptic connections in the brain, as indicated in the Figure 1 below. For example, the development of cognitive skills, language and symbolic thought is at its most critical stage during the years 2-4.

Figure 1 : Critical period of some aspects of brain development and function



Source: *Reaching out to the Child*, HDS, World Bank, 2004.

* Chairperson, National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education, NCERT, set up to prepare the National Curriculum Framework, 2005

Research also shows that if the early years are not supported by a stimulating and enriching physical and psycho-social environment, the chances of the child's brain developing to its full potential are considerably, and sometimes irrevocably, reduced. Hence, the crucial importance of investing in the early years and ensuring an enabling environment ensure a sound foundation for life. Unfortunately, the reality in our country is that actual spending per child, on children below 6 years, is only about one-eighth of the spending per child in the 6-14 years group. It is possible to indicate what the needs of the children are at each sub-stage, as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Needs of children

<i>Before birth / women</i>	<i>Birth to 2 years</i>	<i>3 - 5 year</i>
Ante-natal care	Protection from hazards	Opportunity to develop motor , social, cognitive and language skills
Safe childbirth	Nutrition	Preparation for school by learning pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills
Post natal care	Health care	Access to primary school
Nutrition	Attachment to an adult	
Maternity entitlements	Opportunity for sensory-motor, psycho-social and language development	
Support services	Opportunity for play	
	Day care for children of working women	

Source: Project ACCESS, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.

With these needs in mind various services/programmes are currently available in the three major sectors: public (government), private and not-for-profit (NGO), such as Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Balwadis, creches, preschools etc.

Merely providing the services is not enough. It is essential to ensure the quality of services. This can be taken care of by paying attention to the elements, the strategies needed, the curriculum and the training needs for quality ECCE programme.

Elements of Quality ECCE

Coming to the age group 3-5 years, the key issue today is not just the need to expand services to reach every child, especially as this is now accepted as a Directive Principle of our Constitution. But even more importantly, it is necessary to improve quality in all sectors, using different instrumentalities for each sector. What are the basic elements of quality in ECCE?

Curriculum

- * activity-based, child-centred, age-appropriate, aiming at all-round development
- * adapted to context and flexible

Teachers

- * motivated
- * appropriately trained through experiential 'hands-on' training
- * recognized with status of teacher
- * rewarded with appropriate pay

Ratio and group size

- * that helps adult child interaction.

Infrastructure-supportive of child's needs

- * low-cost and culture specific

Supervision and monitoring

- * that encourages improving quality

Strategies Needed

The strategies needed to achieve the goal of quality ECCE are summarized in the following figure :

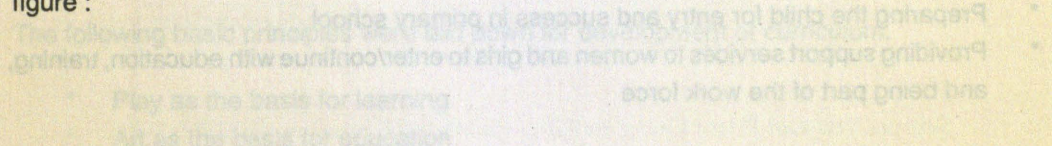
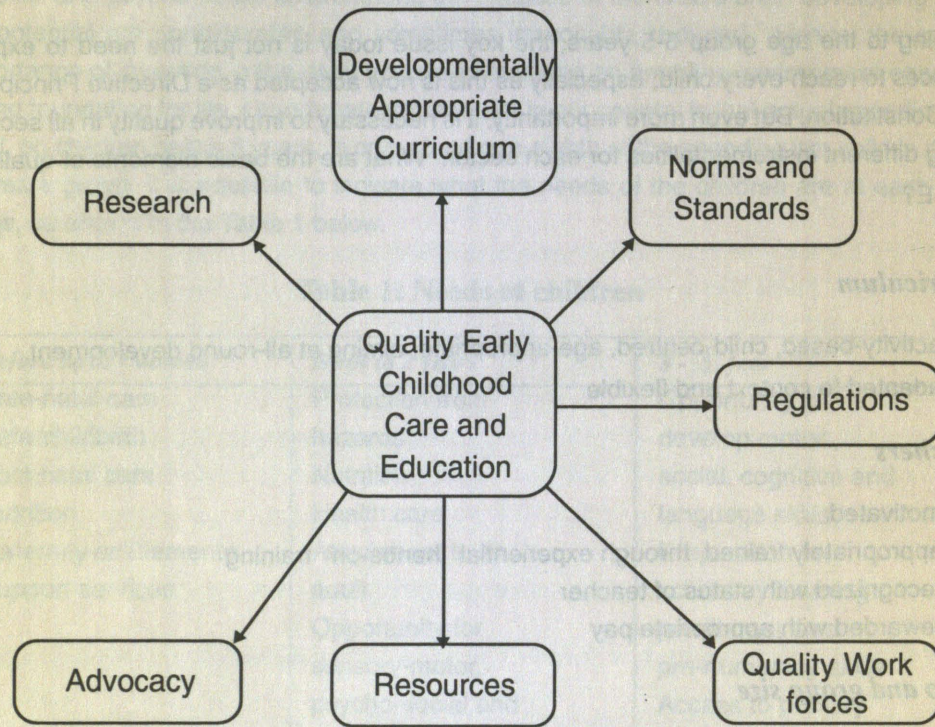


Figure 2 : Strategies to ensure quality.

Source: National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education, NCERT, 2005.

Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education

The curriculum is not a syllabus or a manual, but a broad framework to provide basic guidelines for curriculum and material development, classroom practice and teacher education. The document begins by first laying down the goals and then the objectives.

The goals are :

- * Laying the foundation for a healthy, productive and satisfying life by enabling the child to develop his/her maximum potential
- * Preparing the child for entry and success in primary school
- * Providing support services to women and girls to enter/continue with education, training, and being part of the work force

The objectives are:

- * Developmentally and age appropriate, activity-based curriculum related to the child's needs, interests and abilities.
- * An integrated set of experiences to foster holistic growth and development in all domains, (health and well being, cognitive, physical, social, emotional and language), through an interlinked approach.
- * Flexible enough to suit diverse social, cultural, economic and linguistic contexts as well as individual differences among children.
- * Able to help the child to adjust to the routines of the primary school and to more formal teaching.

The experiences needed for development are:

Freedom from undue adult restraints through

- * Exploration
- * Experimentation
- * Encouragement and challenge

Happiness of achievement for the individual through

- * Opportunity
- * Guidance
- * Support
- * Security and Safety

Adapting to be a member of a collective by

- * Cooperating
- * Listening
- * Sharing
- * Empathizing

Basic principles for development of curriculum are:

The following basic principles were laid down for development of curriculum.

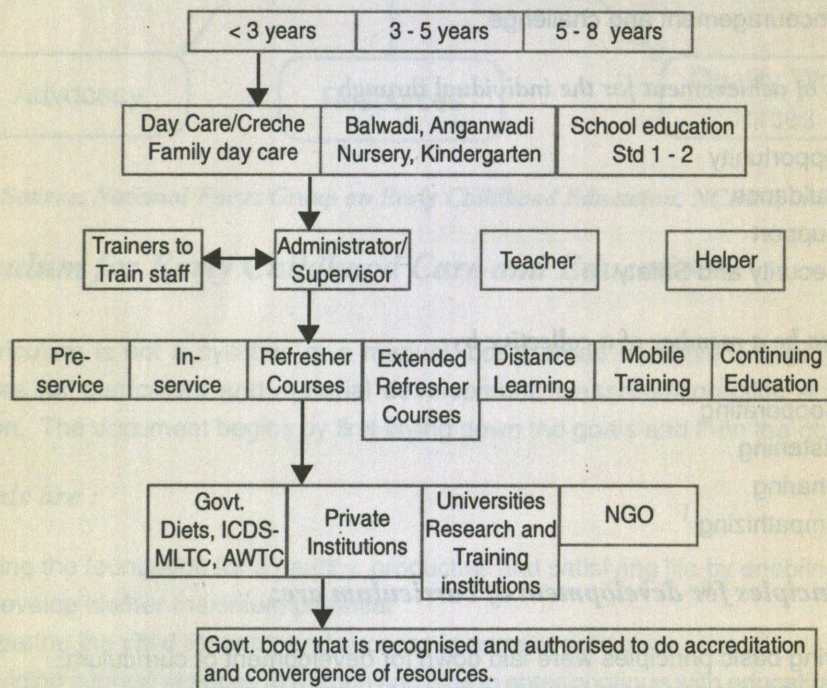
- * Play as the basis for learning
- * Art as the basis for education

- * Recognition of the special features of children's thinking
- * Blend of the textual (basic literacy and numeracy) and the cultural
- * Mix of formal and informal interaction
- * Familiarity and challenge in everyday rhythms
- * Primacy of experience rather than expertise
- * Developmentally appropriate practice and flexibility
- * Use of local materials, arts and knowledge
- * Integration of health, well being and healthy habits

Training Needs for ECCE

To transact any curriculum, teachers must be trained and fully aware of what they have to do and how they have to do it. This is even more true of a play-based curriculum; in the present situation, the majority of teachers in ECCE are untrained, inadequately trained or inappropriately trained. The diagram below summarizes the needs for training in ECCE.

Figure 3 : Training needs for ECCE



Source: National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education, NCERT, 2005.

Finally, the NFG has also indicated the broad policy guidelines for a language in the ECCE classroom, based on the concept of multi-linguality. It is now well-accepted worldwide that early education should be in the child's first language (defined as beyond 'mother tongue' that is the language the child is familiar with in the family, neighbourhood, kin group and community). However, where there are children in a classroom who come from different language backgrounds, (for example in large urban centres or remote tribal hamlets), the early years are the best time for children to understand (or use) more than one language, and to adjust gradually to the language that will be the medium of instruction later. There is a need of a sensitive and trained teacher to handle this kind of a multi-lingual classroom, through play. Further, since children can learn new languages with ease, a second language can be introduced as early as possible. The first language will continue to be the medium of instruction, but the classroom can be bilingual or multi-lingual. As far as English is concerned, the demand for the language is now so widespread and powerful among all parents that it is no longer an academic issue, but a political compulsion, which the school system has to address as best as it can. English can be introduced within the multi-lingual classroom when the institution has the capability in terms of teacher proficiency in English or a second language, as well as teacher skills and training. Training is thus a key issue here, pointing once more to the importance of teacher education for transacting curriculum.

The NCF shows the path of providing quality ECCE services to young children. Now it is upto us to formulate the curriculum appropriately and train the workers in the field of ECCE so as to meet the developmental needs of the young children.

