

The Unsung Saga of ECCE in RTE 2009

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Abstract

Education is neither a need nor a privilege but a necessity for the exercise of all other human rights. It brings about a blossoming of mental faculties and transforms a raw, unlettered human being into an accountable member of the society. Children are the essence of any educational system and reforms. A child's mind grows at an extraordinary pace during the initial six years of one's life and lays the foundation for lifelong development. This important aspect of education has faced negligence by the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, which was otherwise a revolutionary step taken by the Government of India (GoI). The present article aims at reflecting the necessity to review Section 11 of Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and bring necessary amendments for the successful realisation of universalisation of elementary education.

INTRODUCTION

The Parliament of India passed the historic RTE, Act, 2009 formally implemented from April 2010. It entitled education based on equity and non discrimination to all children between the age of 6–14 years. This step was historical as it was the first time that an Act on school education was passed by a central legislation.

Despite the remarkable step of introducing the Right to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009, the statistics of the Ministry of Human Resource Development state that 39 per cent boys and 33 per cent girls dropped out before completing elementary education in 2013. The data clearly depicts that there is some missing link. The missing link could

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be affixed by the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) which would increase enrolment and retention of children in the primary schools. Although the government is trying to frame regulations through the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy (which enunciates the commitment of the GoI to provide integrated services for holistic development of all children from prenatal to six years of age), but the negligence of Early Childhood Care and Education in RTE, 2009 is evident from the statement—‘with a view to prepare children above the age of 3 years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6 years, the appropriate government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education for such children’ (RTE, 2009).

WHY BRING ECCE UNDER RTE, 2009

Early childhood care and education refers to early childhood as the first six years of life. This is acknowledged as the most crucial period when the rate of development is very high and foundation is laid for the formation of attitudes and values. ECCE provides experience for all round development and building school readiness among children. It is a necessary component of education, as learning at this stage is directed by the child’s interest and contextualised by one’s experiences. Even the Charter of Integrated

Child Development Services (ICDS) describes pre-schooling not only as a significant input for providing sound foundation for a child’s development but also as a contributing role in the universalisation of primary education. So in order to achieve the goals of RTE, 2009, universalisation of ECCE should be a prerequisite. This will ensure that states have a constitutional obligation to provide ECCE to all the children, so that responsibility cannot be overlooked as per convenience.

RTE, 2009 aims at ensuring education with quality. High quality of education can be ensured and fostered by providing quality ECCE. A child who undergoes ECCE not only develops better cognitive competencies but also inculcates positive attitude towards learning. Moreover, ECCE prepares a child for better social interaction. Hence, children who are provided with ECCE are more confident and prepared to face the actual ‘school’ environment. This ultimately results in the retention of students in school. There are various reasons due to which students drop out from school. Some of these are listed below.

Trouble in adjusting with the school curriculum

Some students find school education uninteresting due to gaps in what they actually know and what the primary school curriculum expects them to know. Lack of clarity in understanding basic concepts may

result in demotivation to continue school education.

Unpreparedness to face the socio-economic mix of the school environment

Understanding and accepting the heterogeneous characteristics of the society is very crucial for retention of children in school. Lack of attitudinal competency to understand the actual environment may cause unsatisfactory performance or even dropout.

Difficulty in social interaction

Communication is an art. A child should be given opportunities to hone one's communication skill as early as possible. The more a child is comfortable in interacting socially, the less difficult it is in school. Often, we find new entrants to be uncomfortable in talking to their teachers or even their peer group. This may cause loss of confidence and result in dropouts.

Therefore, all the above-mentioned hurdles can be overcome through ECCE as it creates a positive association with students' ability to understand basic concepts of numeracy or language, the ability of problem-solving and the skill of social interaction.

The cardinal reason behind drop out of children at the primary level is 'lack of school readiness'. School readiness can be attained if good quality of pre-school education is received by the children. There is a

huge learning gap among students who entered Class I without pre-schooling. It got reflected in Pratham's ASER 2014 Survey. Around 50 per cent of Class V children cannot even read Class II text. Without mandatory linking of curriculum of ECCE with the students enrolled under RTE, it is already assumed that children have some basic knowledge of alphabet and numbers. The first chapter of NCERT Class I Hindi textbook expects children to write small words and names. It is already assumed that children have knowledge of the alphabet. Similarly, the first chapter of mathematics textbook assumes that children already have knowledge of. Hence the gap created in the learning experiences of those children who did not undergo pre-school programme face difficulty at the primary level and may end up either being a slow learner or dropping out of school education programme. Mandatory linking will not allow gap in learning experiences, hence everyone will be on the same platform at various stages of schooling. There is no denying the fact that much has been already done with respect to framing the curriculum of pre-schooling and marking regulations. But the agenda is that when we are talking about 'Right to education', it cannot and should not be age restricted. Right to Education must be imposed from the very beginning when the foundation for future learning is laid. In order to overcome this issue, ECCE has to be covered under

the umbrella of the RTE, 2009 Act as mandatory.

EXISTING SCENARIO OF ECCE

In our country, where the Right to Education has been declared a fundamental right, the paradox is that there is no uniformity regarding the minimum age for admission to Class I. The minimum age for admission is 5 and 5+ years in twenty states (viz. Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal) and in 6 Union territories (viz. Andaman and Nicobar, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Delhi and Puducherry); whereas the minimum age for admission to Class I is 6 and 6+ years in Bihar, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, and UT of Lakshadweep. Another noteworthy fact is that age is not prescribed for pre-primary level of education in most of the states except for Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Kerala, Meghalaya, Tripura, Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, Lakshadweep and Puducherry (Selected information on school education 2011–12) Government of India, MHRD, Bureau of Planning, Monitoring and Statistics, Statistics Division). Variation in admission age at various entry levels of schooling may lead to creation of various sections of

educated mass with different levels of learning experiences, irrespective of the fact that they belong to the same age group within the same country. This variation may cause a learning gap which will result in dropout or unsatisfactory performance of students in the class.

When we are talking about education as a 'right' in a democratic country like ours, then it becomes indispensable to have same criteria to be followed in all the states. Uniformity in the admission age will bring uniformity in overall structure of RTE, 2009 throughout the country.

The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* was implemented as India's main programme for the universalisation of elementary education. The uniform structure of school education throughout the country should have been an important agenda before the declaration of Right to Education as a fundamental right. There is a strong and necessary need to make amendments in Article 21A on the Right to Free and Compulsory Education for 6–14 year old children and Article 45 to urge states to provide ECCE to all children until they complete the age of 6 years. The government of India approved the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy in 2013. The policy framework also includes the National Curriculum Framework and quality standards for ECCE. But, it is still not recognised as a compulsory provision under the RTE, 2009. In the context of the present policy, the ECCE is not seen as a right of

the child. Unless the GoI makes constitutional mandate for the states for the execution and implementation of policies and schemes, it could be overlooked any time as per convenience. A constitutional mandate will ensure that states have constitutional obligation to provide ECCE to all the children, so that responsibility cannot be overlooked.

Though the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) is responsible for the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Service), which is a centrally sponsored and state administered ECCE programme, covering around 38 million children, still the huge dropout rate is a matter to ponder. The Ministry of Human Resource and Development also took notice of the importance of ECCE as an important factor in promoting retention of children in pre-primary schooling, which is evident from District Primary Education Programme. It aims at strengthening the existing provisions for ECCE through the ICDS by strengthening their linkage with primary schools. In addition to this, the Law Commission of India on 27 August 2015 submitted Report No. 259 titled 'Early Childhood Development and Legal Entitlement' to the Union Minister of Law and Justice. As per the Commission, 'during a time when the world is debating the post 2015 sustainable development goals, which include the guarantee of early childhood development, the time is ripe to position the rights of young

children within the development agenda and create appropriate entitlement with respect to ECD.'

ECCE is wholly a matter of 'schemes', as yet it is not considered the legal entitlement of children. Through schemes and policies children may avail the benefits but it is not binding on the government to enforce them. The ECCE is perceived from the humanitarian perspective. But the dream of universal access and retention can only be fulfilled if it is passed as a legal entitlement. Under such circumstances, any infringement can be challenged by the citizens. More concrete steps need to be implemented to achieve long term effect on the future social adjustment and economic success of children.

CONCLUSION

As an integral part of the Indian Education System, it should be made a compulsion for the states of India to provide free and compulsory ECCE and bring uniformity regarding the age of admission in pre-school and grade 1 throughout the country. In order to achieve this agenda, Section 11 of the Right to Education Act, 2009 should be made mandatory and may be as— 'With a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years, the appropriate government shall make necessary arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children'.

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