6

Developing Foundational Stages of Child: Issues, Challenges and Preventions

Tripti Singh*
Varinder Singh**

Abstract

Early childhood is the time of immense changes in cognitive affective and psychomotor development of a child. This stage of development focuses on critical problems and issues that a child faces and never discloses easily to anybody. This is the period in which the holistic development of a child depends on various factors and different stakeholders. There is a big gap in the learning and skills of a child as some are taught these things in schools whereas some are trained at home beforehand. This paper examines the current issues and challenges in Early Childhood Care and Development. This paper also provided a guide to the stakeholders to understand the modalities of ECCD. It also deals with certain solutions and both short term and long-term remedies that can improve the status of Early Childhood Care and Development. This paper examines the crucial question of what can be done further for early childhood care and development. The authors believe that this paper could serve as a guide to various institutions and may invoke apex bodies to look at current issues and challenges pertaining to ECCD.

INTRODUCTION

A child's early years provide an opportunity to create a foundation for the future. It is a period of great promise and rapid change. During this period, a child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development is in leaps and bounds. A child needs an optimum environment, nutrition, and proper stimulation in the early years to facilitate the harmonious development of the child. Even before the age of six, 85 per cent of a child's cumulative brain develops. It directly indicates the significant importance of stimulation and care of a child's brain in the early years. India is a very rich country with an overall population of 1.38 billion approximately. According to the 2011

*Research Scholar School of Education Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar
**Research Scholar School of Education Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar

Census, the Child population (0–8 years) was recorded as 158.8 million, which is an increase of about 88 per cent to the overall population. With such a large child population, policies must be made in such a way that they cater to the needs of those children. The National Educational Policy, 2020 also emphasises the importance of Early Childhood Care and Development, as its major objective is to provide free, safe, and high-quality appropriate care and education to every child in the age group of 3–6 years by 2025.

Several studies have emphasised that Early Childhood Care and Education programme have long term effects on children's academic achievement, attendance, and grade retention, (Cortazar et al. 2019), (Barnett, 1995), (Dean and Jayachandran, 2019). Therefore, children at the primary level must have access to multifaceted, activity-based, and discovery-based education to strengthen the foundation for the future. There are many kinds of issues which a child is facing, and our education system is both the cause and effect of current societal divides—Equity, Access and Quality.

There are several challenges involved in Early Childhood Care and Development. Some of them are discussed below:

Shortage of Early Childhood Education Staff

School staff have a direct impact on children's cognitive affective, and psychomotor development.

No other person in students' lives impacts developing attitudes towards cultural diversity. There are significant staff shortages in primary schools found in India. It may be due to several contributing factors. An ageing workforce is a major factor; it indicates no new recruitment after the retirement of old teachers. Such a type of imbalance leads to a shortage of teachers in the primary education sector that directly affects the child's education. Academic performance of students is directly correlated with the teacher's expertise and teaching competency.

Comparatively Low Salaries of Primary Teachers and Lack of Opportunities in Rural Areas

The working conditions are equally important as an integral part of teachers' education and training program. The motivation and encouragement the staff gets from the workplace influence their performance and behaviour. But the salary, the primary teachers get is quite low, which does not motivate them to perform well. The staff appointed in rural areas feel isolated, as they are far away from the social, technological opportunities available in urban areas. The teachers feel that they do not have professional opportunities to grow. Teacher development programmes, training courses, seminars, and workshops are usually unavailable in rural settings. Moreover, there has been a deduction in the expenditure on education from 4.14 per cent in

2014–2015 15 to 3.2 per cent in the year 2020–21. (Economic Survey, 2019–2020). The National Policy on Education 1968 recommended spending 6 per cent of GDP on education. Furthermore, NEP 2020 confirms the proposal of expanding public investment in education to 6 per cent of GDP. In addition to this, high variations are found in the expenditure on education especially at pre-primary and primary levels between urban and rural areas. The average expenditure per student at primary level in rural areas was ₹3,545 whereas, it was ₹13,516 in urban areas (Household Social Consumption on Education in India Report, 2020).

Challenges in Dropping off and Picking up Children from School

The distance to school can be long and unsafe for some students. It is the reason why some parents refuse to send their children, particularly girls, to school. As per the data released by the National Crime Records Bureau 1,28,531 crimes against children were reported in the year 2020 (NCRB, 2020). It is observed that usually children go to school alone and some are allowed to go in the company of other children. This entails the risk of being hit by speeding vehicles, bullying by older children, and kidnapping. Some parents pick up their children very late from school. Some children do not find anyone at home when they go home to look after them. In India, over 165 children die every day because of an unintended injury.

Nearly 41 per cent of all fatal injuries to children occur on roads followed by 31 percent occurring at home (NIMHANS, 2019). Therefore, in the absence of surveillance, children are more prone to accidents. And if accidents are not prevented, they can cause disability or in some cases death. Moreover, psychological and emotional trauma can result in a lack of self-esteem which can lead to poor social, physical and academic performance.

Unsafe and Insecure School Environment

The facilities in some primary schools are not conducive to enhancing learning. According to the National Report on Safe and Secure School Environment, 2019–2020, out of 26,071 Schools across India, randomly selected for the survey, it was found that 20 per cent of the schools had old or dilapidated buildings. 19 per cent of schools were found near the railway track. Not only this, only 30 per cent of government schools had transportation facilities for children. Also, only 66 per cent of schools have the required number of classrooms (National Report on Safe and Secure School Environment, 2019–2020).

In addition to this, many Indian classrooms do not have adequate space, which leads to children being squeezed in small classrooms. This results in an inefficient teaching-learning process and the child is unable to put questions to the teacher. And so the teacher is unable to solve individual queries and to look

after the children individually. The other physical infrastructure such as water tanks, toilets, playgrounds are not adequate and properly located. Some classrooms usually lack safe roofing, doors, windows, flooring, and adequate ventilation. The benches and chairs are not child-sized and age-appropriate. The playgrounds are usually unsafe as they are not free from harmful plants, discarded materials and sharp objects. Even the school camps, in some cases, do not have outer boundary walls, lockable gates and gatekeepers to prevent children from sneaking out of school without the teacher's permission.

Challenges Concerning Water and Sanitation

Even though our education ministry has frequently encouraged states and Union Territories to guarantee that all schools within their jurisdiction have access to safe and adequate drinking water. Still, there are 72,849 schools in India that do not have functional drinking water facilities (UDISE+, 2021). The insufficient water and sanitary facilities can cause damage to the health and development of children. Many primary schools have an unsafe water supply that increases the risk of infectious diseases. Moreover, the lack of sanitisers and unsanitary toilets leads to infections in children. Thus, unsafe water, lack of sanitation and hygiene in schools can affect child health, attendance and retention, as well as the performance of the child.

The polluted drinking water gives birth to water-borne diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea and skin infections.

Challenges for School Feeding Programs

Primary schools in India are required to provide mid-day meals to children in order to ensure a balanced diet. It is observed that some children come to school without having eaten due to their parent's neglect or low socio-economic status. Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) programme earlier known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meal is one of the important rights-based centrally sponsored schemes under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA). The scheme's main goal is to enhance the nutritional status of pupils studying in Classes I–VIII.

Although schools are provided food grains, one thousand rupees per month for 10 months for honorarium to cook-cum-helper, kitchen devices and cooking cost, etc., the cooking cost includes the cost of ingredients, e.g., pulses, vegetables, cooking oil and fuel. ₹4.97 per child per day is provided for primary and ₹ 7.45 for upper primary (PM-Poshan, 2021), but due to rising cost of vegetables, edible oil, and gas, many schools struggle to provide meals. The prices also vary from district to district, but schools get fixed amounts for all. Moreover, the people dealing with food do not have valid medical certificates from a recognised government

hospital. They do not even cover their hair and put on an apron to ensure proper hygiene which is likely to pose a health risk to children.

Poor Financial Condition of Parents

Parents are one of the most significant and determining factors in a child's life. Parents' socio-economic status is one of the frequently stated variables that has a significant correlation with pupils' academic success, (Eshetu, 2015). Parent's economic conditions have a relatively high influence on students' academic performance compared to other determinants. The families with high socio-economic status often have more success in preparing their young children for school (Al-Matalka, 2014).

In contrast, parents from low socio-economic backgrounds sometimes struggle to increase their financial resources and find themselves short on time when it comes to teaching their kids morals, etiquette, and good values. This can even lead to children going without the basic nutrition or immunisations, (Osonwa et al., 2013). A multi-dimensional poverty rate of 16.4 per cent was reportedly present in India as of 2021, while another 18.7 per cent of the population (2,60,941 thousand in 2020) is categorised as vulnerable to multi-dimensional poverty. Over 13 million children between the ages of 10 and 14 who were affected by poverty in 2022 (Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, 2022).

Parental Attitude

The most reliable indicator of a child's educational success is family participation. Children's access to ECEC is correlated with parents' attitude toward ECEC which, in turn, is influenced by the parents' level of education (Ghosh & Steinberg, 2022). The attitude of many parents is favorable, despite the government's efforts to provide free education to all (Samal, 2012 & Balaji, 2018).

Numerous social stereotypes, traditions, and expectations limit girls' access to education in general and higher education in particular. The seclusion and veiling of women, as well as the notion that women and men live in distinct worlds, are ancient traditions and beliefs. The early marriage of women and the futility of investing in their education play a big role in how parents, especially illiterate parents, feel about education (Bordhan, 2014). Moreover, children whose parents do not attend parents-teachers' meetings, do not discuss their academic success with the teacher, and do not oversee their homework, are more likely to drop out of school (Paul, Rashmi & Srivastava, 2021).

Toxic Stress and Lack of Motivational Programme

Long exposure to high-level anxiety from violence, deprivation, trauma or

neglect is called toxic stress, and it can have devastating psychological and physical consequences for children. Trauma can affect the learning ability of a child and his ability to stay in school. At the primary stage, the child needs to be motivated from time to time so that their output can be enhanced efficiently. But still, there is a lack of motivational programmes in schools.

Curriculum Load

Many pre-schools, both government and private, end up encouraging rote learning to get children ready for Class I, which is detrimental for their entire development and puts an unnecessary curriculum load on them (Behera & Malik, 2019). Children feel great pressure, being burdened with undesirable expectations and boring classroom practices. The load of the curriculum does not allow children to learn freely and happily. The curriculum structure is so heavily loaded for the children at an elementary stage that they find it difficult to express them. The burden of formal education is so much that the parents send their wards to private tuition centres. In India, 95 per cent of high school students and 87 per cent of primary school students take private tuitions (Mascarenhas, 2015). The extra classes put more burden on children, and they do not get time to involve themselves in any kind of indoor or outdoor activities.

Lack of Co-ordination among Different Agencies

Early Childhood Care and Education services are provided by numerous programmes, primarily in the areas of education, health, nutrition and social welfare. It's nonetheless challenging to translate intersectoral action into practical application at various levels. Collaboration among different agencies is often affected by the vertical organisation of sectors, entrenched thinking, and a limited utilisation of resources merely within a certain area or programme. In such situations, it is challenging to guarantee accountability for service delivery and gauge results and impacts. There are still gaps in the co-ordination of nurturing care for ECD, despite the frontline workers' important contribution to improvement. Overwhelming workloads, constrained accountability to sectoral outcomes, and constrained supervisory mechanisms are issues that affect all levels (Agrawal et al., 2021).

Working Parents and Single Parent Families

In urban areas of India, 69.1 per cent of men and 20.6 per cent of women are employed (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023). For a child's brain development and long-term physical and mental health, some early childhood stages are crucial and sensitive, (Thompson et al., 2010). Parents involved in their jobs spend less time with their children, which is another major issue. Children do not

feel comfortable and hence they do not share what they feel, what they are going through or what they may have suffered in the past. It leads to a communication gap at the early stage, which takes its own time to be filled later. It leads to a stubborn and aggressive nature in children. They do not take an interest in the day-to-day issues of their children. Single parents find it hard to take care of the child in the initial stage of development. Single parenthood has emerged as a clear risk factor for children's mental health issues, leading to greater psychological distress and depression (Malik & Irshad, 2012).

Bullying and Teasing

Bullying is a public health issue that has an impact on children's physical and emotional health (Francis et al., 2022). Although peers are vital for socialisation, peers can also be a significant source of stress. Peer maltreatment includes deliberate social isolation, physical or verbal abuse. It may also include arguments that end up in violent activities. All such high doses of undesirable behavior are the result of television, video games, domestic violence, society and environment, etc. Bullying has been linked to a variety of physical and mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, a higher risk of self-harm, attempted suicide, poor academic performance, and crime and delinquency.

Multicultural Classroom

Language barrier is another challenge in the teaching-learning process, as it generally exists between teacher and student when students or teacher do not belong to the local area. It becomes very difficult for the learner to grasp the concepts taught in another language. As the instructional medium should be the mother tongue, it becomes difficult for a teacher to make them understand the concept in their regional language. Children from different regions suffer from this problem as they face difficulty in understanding a language other than their mother tongue. At the same time, this raises a question on teachers and teaching competency.

Lack of Training for Teachers

There is a lack of competent educators for early childhood education. This is because of defects in stage-specific professional training and career mapping. There is no provision for continuous professional development programmes to enable them to carry out effective early childhood teaching-learning practices. Teachers are not trained for play-based and multilevel teaching to 3–8 years old students. They are not provided with good educational material as per the curricular and pedagogical requirements. They are not trained properly to teach students in their mother tongue or regional language. Untrained teachers do not feel confident to teach their students

with that zeal compared to the trained teachers. Lack of knowledge results in poor remuneration among teachers.

Inclusion Issue and Biasness of a Teacher

Sometimes, there are situations when all children are not included in certain co-curricular activities in school. And in certain situations, individual attention is not given which they need from the respective teachers. This often bridges the gap between students and among the group of students and teachers.

Gender Equality Issues and Discrimination

It has been seen that in certain cases, right from birth, boys and girls are differentiated and different expectations lead to gender inequality. In schools also, this practice of differentiation and discrimination often leads to inflexible mindsets.

Effect of Media

Media plays a very important role in the mindsets of small children. They get influenced by what they see on television or the internet. Children become aggressive and more rigid in their lives. high exposure to media and excessive usage of electronic gadgets at the initial stage have adverse effects on the health of children. The over-dependence on media results in weak bonding between parents and their children as they spend more time using gadgets.

Child Prostitution, Child Trafficking and Sexual Violence

One of the most inhuman criminal actions in the modern era of human civilisation is the trafficking of children. Every day, hundreds of children disappear throughout India. A total of 63,407 children were reported missing in 2016, 63,349 children were reported missing in 2017, and 67,134 children were reported missing in 2018 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2019). The trafficked children are made to engage in inhuman activities such as terrorism, prostitution, slavery, cheap or unpaid labour and organ harvesting (Boruah & Roy, 2021). In addition to this 30 per cent of 20 million prostitutes in India are minors (Panda & Singh, 2021). Children are the most suitable targets because they are among the most vulnerable populations that traffickers frequently prey upon. Teenage girls between the ages of 12–18 are an easy target for pornographic and prostitution rackets (Sehanobi, 2021).

Child Labor

Despite various acts and policies, child labour is a serious problem. One in five children in the world's poorest nations serve as child labour (UNICEF, 2022). These children are too young to engage in risky activities that harm their

mental, physical, social, or academic development. Moreover, 160 million children work as child labour around the world, 79 million of them are engaged in dangerous work. Also, boys are more prone to child labour than girls at every age (International Labor Office & United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). According to the 2011 Census, 259.6 million children in India are between the ages of 5–14. Of these, 10.1 million (3.9% of all children) are employed as "main workers"or "marginal workers." Additionally, almost 42.7 million kids in India do not attend school. The problem of child labour continues to pose a challenge before the nation.

Ineffective Implementation of Policies and Programme

There is an urgent need to convince politicians, policy-makers, educators, and programmers to work more effectively on the implementation of ECCE as there are so many loopholes, and it needs to be corrected for the smooth functioning of the administration and the organisations.

IMPROVING PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT

- It is suggested that there is a need to establish a system to cope up with the emerging childcare issues and problems of children. The National Education Policy, 2020 has emphasised that the pupil-teacher ratio should be 30:1.

But still there are some states and UTs like Bihar (57:1) and Delhi (33:1) where the pupil teacher ratio is higher.

- The curriculum should be child-oriented and learner-friendly. There should be an efficient use of suitable teaching aids for the teaching-learning process in a classroom. There should be flexibility in the programme concerning societal needs.

- Multilingual skills must be instilled at the foundational year. Multilingualism is an asset that should be cultivated in our classrooms. Child's home language may be different from the medium of instruction at school. The class teacher must incorporate children's home languages. Adequate space and time must be provided for the children so that they can freely use their languages to think and express themselves.

- There is a strong need to change instructional patterns from formal teaching to more child-friendly instructions and to create a more conducive environment for the children.

- Counseling activities should be organised regularly, both for students and teachers.

- There should be a provision of required resources to achieve learning outcomes.

- Teacher vacancies for primary schools should be filled as early as possible, particularly in deprived areas and schools with large pupil-teacher ratios. Moreover, more weightage should be given to employing local and female teachers. The teacher-student ratio should be maintained in a classroom for an effective teaching-learning process.
- All the facilities should be provided in the schools concerning indoor and outdoor games as well as the other activities.
- Parents and school staff must be aware of children's safety and security while going to and coming from school.
- To ensure a safe, clean and healthy environment for learners, the school should understand legal and moral responsibility. The school staff and parents should identify a health and nutrition programme as a strategy to reduce health-related issues of children that can affect a child's learning.
- A school should be a place that is free from any type of physical harm, danger, disease, or injury.
- The child's nutrition as well as mental and physical health should be seriously addressed by providing healthy meals and the provision of counselors and social workers in the school.
- Regular assessment should be implemented especially at all levels in schools with the purpose of evaluating each student's progress, recognising the weaker points, and developing individualised learning plans for students.
- All stakeholders must function wholeheartedly for the young minds to grow into healthy human beings- both mentally and physically, as well as responsible citizens.

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