Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): The Foundation of Learning

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years of age. Early childhood education has been included as a specific target in the context of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Target 4.2 of the SDG, aims to ensure that all girls and boys including those belonging to disadvantaged groups and with special needs have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030 so that they are ready for primary education. Early years are ‘critical’ since the rate of development during this period is more rapid than at any other stage of development. The brain is most flexible and adaptable to learning during these early years. Over 85 per cent of a child’s cumulative brain development occurs before the age of six, indicating the critical importance of appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years to ensure healthy brain development and growth. This growth is influenced not only by the nutritional and health status of the child but also by the psychosocial experiences and environment the child is exposed to during these early years. Therefore, investing in foundational years in the form of preschool settings, provisions and programmes are extremely important.

In the new 5+3+3+4 structure proposed by NEP 2020, a strong base of ECCE from age three is included, which is aimed at promoting better overall learning, development, and well-being. NEP 2020 proposes three years of *anganwadi/preschool/balvatika* for three to six years age group before Class I (*ECCE/ECE/preschool or pre-primary education/preparatory class, etc. are synonymously used for preschool education*)

In India, preschool education is provided by all the three sectors – government, private and NGOs. In government, it is mainly provided through Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres known as *anganwadis*. There are a large number of private preschools that provide preschool education, and some NGOs that provide preschool education as social welfare for children from marginalised
and disadvantaged sections. In 2017-18, two years of preschool education before Class I was added in the school education continuum under *Samagra Shiksha* by the MoE. ECCE in our country is delivered through early childhood education institutions consisting of (a) standalone *anganwadis*; (b) *anganwadis* co-located with primary schools; (c) pre-primary schools/sections covering at least age five to six years co-located with the existing primary schools; and (d) stand-alone pre-schools (NEP 2020).

In NEP 2020 early childhood education has emerged as an area of high priority. ECCE ideally is flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning, comprising of alphabets, languages, numbers, counting, colours, shapes, indoor and outdoor play, puzzles and logical thinking, problem-solving, drawing, painting and other visual art, craft, drama and puppetry, music and movement. It also includes a focus on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation.

“The overall aim of ECCE is 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.” – NEP 2020

ECCE ensures holistic development of a child by attending to the child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs, which in turn provides a solid foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Experiences are provided in a natural, joyful and stimulating environment using a non-formal, play-way and activity-based approach. Preschool education ensures a smooth transition from preschool to early primary classes leading to better performance and better retention rates.

Listening, speaking, reading, writing and numeracy are among the most important skills children learn. Earlier, literacy was thought to be the skill of reading and writing, which was taught to children when they were ‘ready’ for it. Today, we understand that literacy ‘emerges' gradually in the early years.
when young babies hear sounds and have them repeated and encouraged by sensitive caring adults. Later, when children get the opportunities to see print in their environment, handle books, listen to stories, look and talk about pictures and make marks on sand and paper, their literacy skills are refined and improved. Early literacy and numeracy skills are very important as children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively at the primary level are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or in low-skilled jobs, have poorer emotional and physical health and are more likely to end up in poverty. Literacy and numeracy carry wide-ranging benefits not only for individuals but also for families, communities and society.

NEP 2020 Highlights

ECCE requires high-quality infrastructure, play equipment, and well-trained *anganwadi* workers/teachers. Every *anganwadi* or preschool should be well-ventilated, well-designed, child-friendly with well-constructed buildings and an enriched learning environment. Children in *anganwadi* centres should take activity-filled tours and meet the teachers and students of their local primary schools to make a smooth transition from *anganwadi* centres to primary schools. *Anganwadis* should be fully integrated into school complexes/clusters. *Anganwadi* children, parents, and teachers should be invited to attend and participate in school/school complex programmes and vice versa.

- It is envisaged that before the age of five, every child will move to a ‘Preparatory Class’ or *balvatika* (that is, before Class I), which has an ECCE qualified teacher. The learning in the Preparatory Class will also be play-based with focus on developing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities and early literacy and numeracy. The mid-day meal programme will also be extended to the Preparatory Classes in primary schools as per NEP 2020. Health check-ups and growth monitoring that are available in the *anganwadi* system will also be
made available to Preparatory Class students of *anganwadi* as well as primary schools.

- High-quality ECCE teachers are crucial for the implementation of the ECCE programme. To prepare an initial cadre of high-quality ECCE teachers in *anganwadi*, the current *anganwadi* workers/teachers need to be trained through a systematic effort in accordance with the curricular/pedagogical framework developed by NCERT. *Anganwadi* workers/teachers with qualifications of 10+2 and above will be given a six-month certificate programme in ECCE. Those with lower educational qualifications will be given a one-year diploma programme covering early literacy, numeracy, and other relevant aspects of ECCE. These programmes can be run through digital/distance mode using DTH channels as well as smartphones, allowing teachers to acquire ECCE qualifications with minimal disruption to their current work. The ECCE training of *anganwadi* workers/teachers will be mentored by the Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) of the School Education Department, which will hold at least one monthly contact class for continuous assessment. In the longer term, state governments will prepare cadres of professionally qualified educators for ECCE, through stage-specific professional training, mentoring mechanisms, and career mapping. Necessary facilities will also be created for the initial professional preparation of these educators and their continuous professional development (CPD). ECCE will also be introduced in *ashramshalas* in tribal-dominated areas and in all formats of alternative schooling in a phased manner. The process for integration and implementation of ECCE in and alternative schooling will be similar to that detailed above. The responsibility for ECCE curriculum and pedagogy will lie with the MoE to ensure its continuity from pre-primary school through primary school, and to ensure due attention to the foundational aspects of education.
The planning and implementation of ECCE curriculum will be carried out jointly by the MoE, Women and Child Development (WCD), Health and Family Welfare (HFW), and Tribal Affairs. A special joint task force will be constituted for continuous guidance of the smooth integration of ECCE into the school education.

NEP 2020 says that the “highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025.” Therefore, classrooms will need to be strengthened with required resources, print-rich environments, child-friendly textbooks, workbooks and storybooks, etc. for children. Teacher resource material /handbooks, etc. will have to be made available. Capacity building of teachers will be done to deal with multilingual classrooms to contribute towards achievement of FLN mission goals. These changes in the classroom will have to be supported by enabling conditions like increasing instructional time – 90 minutes for language learning and 60 minutes of numeracy in foundational years. The policy recommends that key stage assessments should be conducted in Classes III, V and VIII. The availability of information about the performance of students in the primary grades based on learning data will support parents in making an informed decision. Besides, NEP 2020 also proposes to set up PARAKH – an independent national level assessment centre that will set norms and guidelines for conducting assessments.