



JAAFR
INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH JOURNAL

JOURNAL OF ADVANCE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

JAAFR.ORG | ISSN : 2984-889X

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN INDIA: POLICY FRAMEWORKS, INITIATIVES, AND SCHEMES

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Abstract :

This paper examines the landscape of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India by mapping key policy frameworks, flagship initiatives, and implementation schemes that shape services for children aged 0–8 years. Drawing on a review of national policies, program documents, and empirical studies, the study traces the evolution of ECCE from welfare-oriented interventions to a rights-based, education-centric approach—highlighting the role of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Right to Education Act's foundational-stage provisions, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The analysis identifies strengths such as expanded reach, increased policy coherence, and growing emphasis on developmentally appropriate pedagogy, alongside persistent challenges: uneven service quality, workforce capacity gaps, infrastructure shortfalls, and socio-linguistic barriers in diverse rural and urban contexts. Using a framework that integrates policy intent, institutional architecture, funding mechanisms, and ground-level delivery, the paper synthesizes evidence on programmatic outcomes and implementation bottlenecks, and presents targeted recommendations—strengthening teacher training, improving monitoring systems, aligning health-nutrition-education platforms, and promoting community engagement. The study concludes that realizing equitable, high-quality ECCE in India requires coordinated multisectoral action, sustained public investment, and context-sensitive models that bridge policy ambition with local realities.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Care and Education, ICDS, NEP 2020, policy implementation, foundational stage, India.*

Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for human development and nation-building. The period from birth to eight years of age is crucial, as children experience rapid cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. Research from neuroscience and developmental psychology underscores that experiences during this phase lay the foundation for lifelong learning, socio-emotional competence, and adaptive behavior. Quality early childhood interventions not only enhance school readiness and learning outcomes but also contribute to social equity, health, and economic development over the long term.

In India, the recognition of early childhood development as a national priority has evolved over decades. Historically, initiatives were primarily welfare-oriented, focusing on child survival, nutrition, and health, with education being a peripheral aspect. Programs such as **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**, launched in 1975, were designed to provide a package of services including supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, and pre-school education through **Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)**. While ICDS has been instrumental in reaching millions of children across the country, issues related to service quality, infrastructure inadequacies, limited trained workforce, and inconsistent pedagogical practices have posed challenges to achieving holistic ECCE outcomes.

The educational dimension of ECCE gained more attention with the **National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986**, which emphasized early childhood education as an integral part of the education system. Subsequent policy frameworks, including the **National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013)**, reinforced the need for a rights-based, child-centered approach, emphasizing access, equity, and quality. The **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009**, further strengthened the mandate by recognizing the importance of the foundational years in preparing children for formal schooling. A major paradigm shift occurred with the introduction of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, which conceptualizes the “Foundational Stage” (ages 3–8 years) as the first stage of school education, integrating pre-primary and early primary schooling into a cohesive framework. NEP 2020 advocates for play-based, inquiry-driven, and activity-oriented pedagogies that are responsive to children’s cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development. It also emphasizes the use of local languages, inclusion of marginalized groups, and bridging the urban-rural educational divide. Despite progressive policy articulation, the implementation of ECCE in India faces persistent challenges. These include uneven service quality, inadequate teacher training, poor monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and socio-cultural and linguistic diversity that complicate standardized delivery. Rural and underserved regions often experience gaps in infrastructure, accessibility, and parental awareness, further exacerbating inequalities in early learning outcomes.

Understanding the policy landscape, initiatives, and schemes related to ECCE is essential for identifying both achievements and gaps, and for developing context-sensitive strategies that ensure equitable, high-quality early learning opportunities. This paper explores the evolution of ECCE in India, examines key

policy frameworks and flagship programs, evaluates implementation challenges, and highlights pathways for strengthening the early childhood education ecosystem.

The study emphasizes that effective ECCE implementation requires **coordinated multi-sectoral action**, adequate public investment, strong community engagement, and continuous professional development for educators—ultimately bridging the gap between policy intent and ground-level realities to foster holistic child development.

Concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to a comprehensive approach to supporting the overall development of children from birth to eight years of age, focusing not only on formal education but also on care, health, nutrition, and social-emotional growth. It encompasses a range of services and experiences designed to ensure that children develop holistically and are prepared for lifelong learning. ECCE is rooted in the understanding that the early years are foundational for cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development. Quality early childhood experiences promote curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for academic success and social adaptability. The concept integrates **care, protection, nutrition, and learning** into a single framework, recognizing that optimal development cannot occur in isolation from health, safety, and socio-emotional well-being.

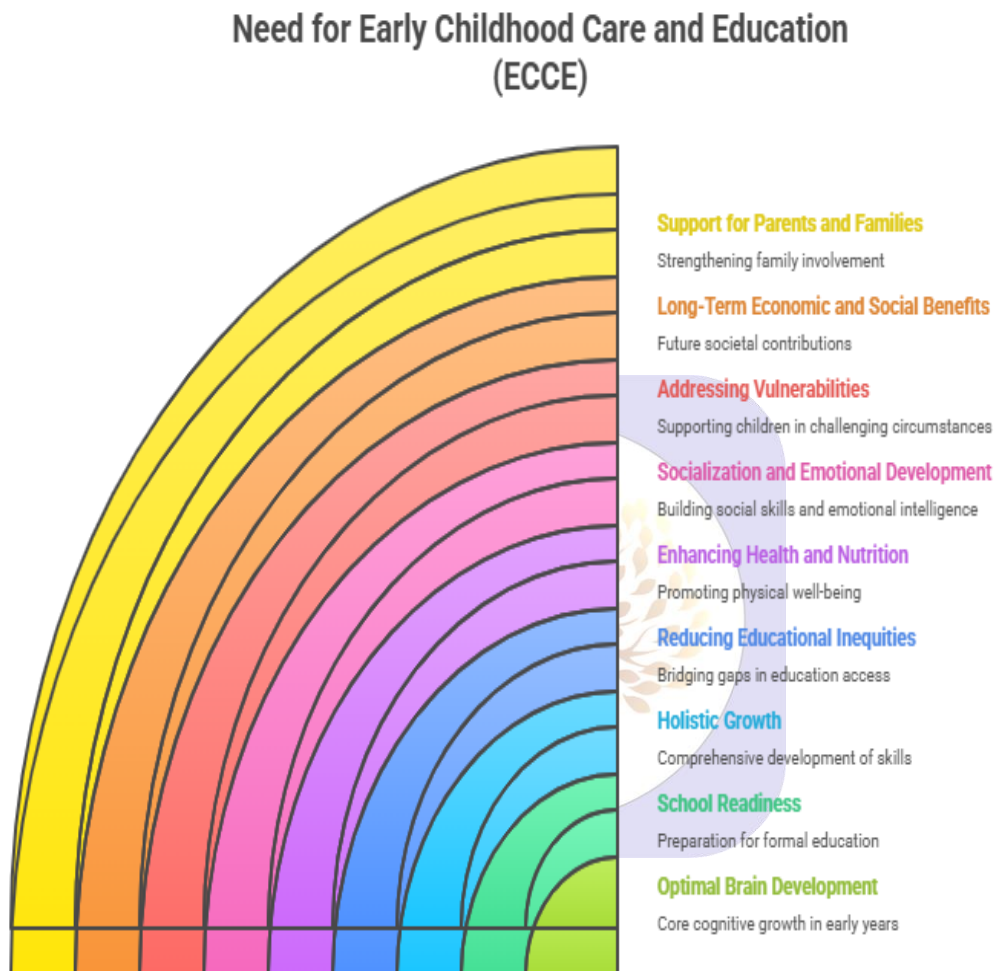
Key dimensions of ECCE include:

1. **Care and Protection:** Ensuring that children grow in a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment, protected from neglect, abuse, and exploitation.
2. **Health and Nutrition:** Providing adequate nutrition, immunization, and health services to support physical growth and prevent developmental delays.
3. **Early Learning and Education:** Engaging children in play-based, activity-oriented learning experiences that stimulate cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional development.
4. **Family and Community Engagement:** Encouraging active participation of parents, caregivers, and the community in children's growth and learning.

The concept of ECCE has evolved globally from welfare-oriented initiatives to a **rights-based and education-focused approach**, emphasizing equitable access, quality learning, and inclusive practices. In India, ECCE is increasingly seen as a critical phase in the educational continuum, forming the **Foundational Stage** under the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**. This stage integrates early childhood education with primary schooling and emphasizes a child-centric, developmentally appropriate pedagogy. In essence, ECCE is not merely pre-school education but a holistic developmental framework that prepares children for formal schooling while promoting their overall well-being, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and societal participation.

Need for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is essential for the holistic development of children and for laying the foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and social integration. The need for ECCE arises from the recognition that the early years—from birth to eight years—are critical for physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. The following points highlight the importance and rationale for ECCE:

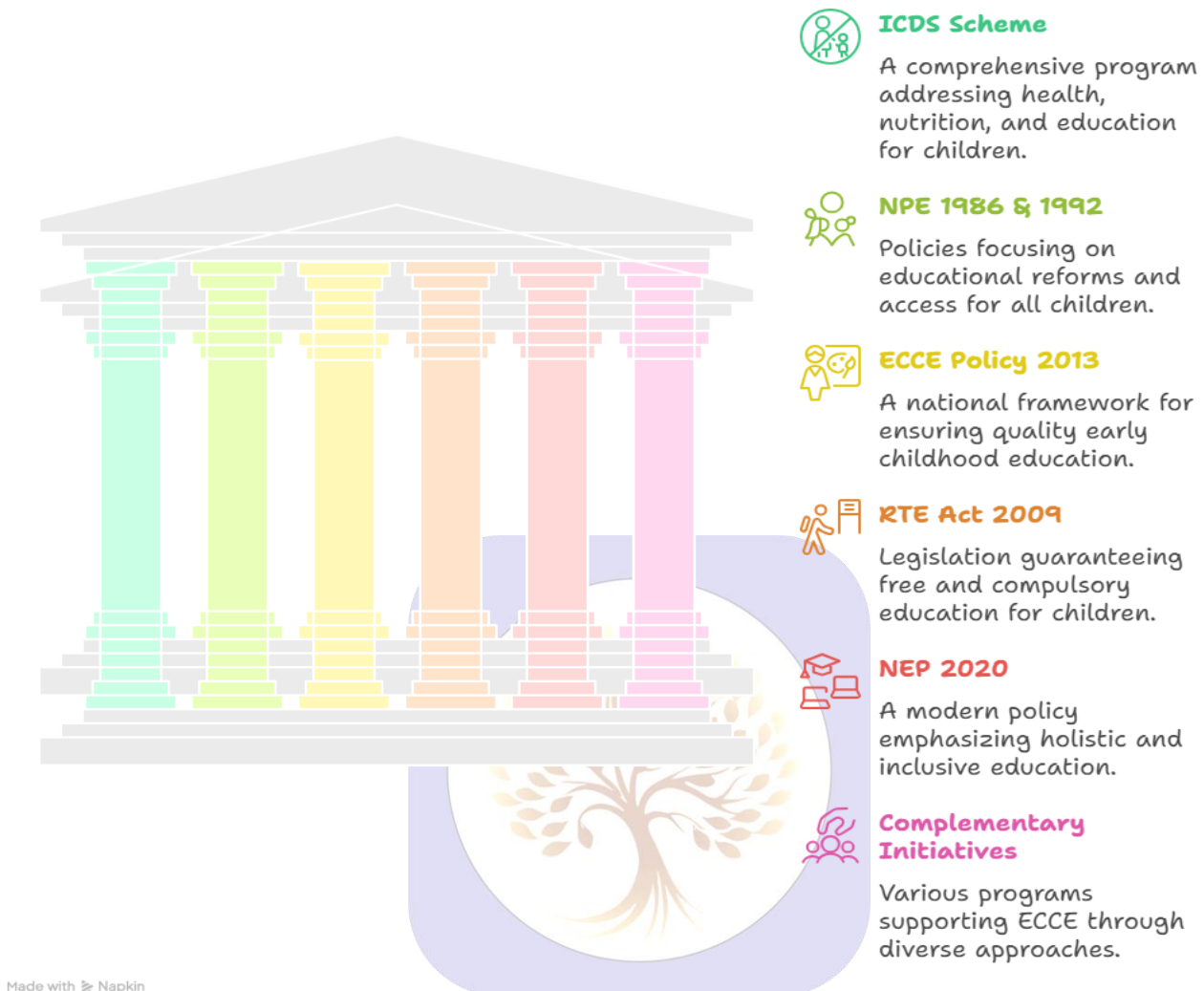


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Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India: Major Policies and Initiatives

The development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India has been shaped by a series of landmark policies and programmes aimed at ensuring the holistic growth of young children. These initiatives combine education, health, and nutrition to lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India: Major Policies and Initiatives



1. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme (1975)

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), launched in 1975, is the flagship programme for early childhood development in India. It aims to provide a comprehensive package of services to children below six years and their mothers. Its key components include supplementary nutrition to prevent malnutrition and support physical growth, pre-school education through play-based activities at Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), and essential health services such as immunization, health check-ups, and referrals. Additionally, health and nutrition education is provided to mothers to promote better childcare and dietary practices. The ICDS has played a pivotal role in reaching millions of children, especially in rural and marginalized communities, by integrating early education with health and nutrition interventions for overall child development.

2. National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 and 1992

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, revised in 1992, recognized early childhood education as the foundation of formal schooling. It emphasized the integration of early childhood care and education with primary education and encouraged child-centred, play-based, and activity-oriented pedagogies. This policy marked a major step in embedding ECCE within the national education framework, laying the groundwork for later reforms in early education.

3. National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy, 2013

The National ECCE Policy (2013) provided a structured framework for the holistic development of children aged 0–8 years. Its objectives include ensuring universal access to quality early learning, promoting developmentally appropriate curricula and teaching methods, and integrating care, nutrition, health, and education services. It also emphasized teacher training and professional development to enhance the quality of early learning.

Significantly, the policy adopted a rights-based approach to ECCE, focusing on equity, inclusion, and quality learning outcomes for all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The RTE Act, 2009, laid the foundation for universal elementary education in India and acknowledged the foundational stage (ages 3–6 years) as a vital part of the school education system. It made early childhood education mandatory before Grade 1, ensuring that every child is prepared for formal schooling. The Act also recommended child-friendly, play-based curricula and pedagogy, while emphasizing the need to bridge educational disparities for children from marginalized groups.

5. National Education Policy (NEP), 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's approach to early education. It defines the Foundational Stage (ages 3–8 years), integrating pre-primary and early primary education into a unified framework. The policy promotes play-based, activity-oriented, and experiential learning, and introduces multilingual education—with a focus on the mother tongue or home language in the early years. It prioritizes holistic development, including socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical growth, and calls for strengthening teacher education and capacity building for ECCE. Moreover, NEP 2020 emphasizes community and parental involvement, ensuring continuity between home and school learning. This policy aligns India's ECCE framework with global best practices while addressing the country's diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

6. Other Complementary Initiatives

In addition to major policies, several government initiatives indirectly support ECCE in India:

- The Mid-Day Meal Scheme enhances nutritional support and promotes school attendance, improving children's health and learning readiness.
- The Bal Bhavan and Early Learning Centres foster creative and cultural development through enrichment programmes.
- The Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan ensures equitable access, retention, and quality in education, including at the foundational stage.
- The Poshan Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission) addresses nutritional security for children under six, linking health, nutrition, and learning outcomes.

Together, these policies and programmes form a comprehensive framework for Early Childhood Care and Education in India, ensuring that every child receives the care, education, and nourishment needed to thrive and succeed in life.

Schemes for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India

The Indian government has implemented several schemes to promote Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), integrating health, nutrition, and early learning. These schemes aim to provide holistic development opportunities for children from birth to eight years, with special attention to marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

1. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme (1975)

Launched in 1975, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme is one of India's flagship programmes aimed at promoting the holistic development of children and improving the health and nutritional status of mothers. The scheme provides a comprehensive package of services, including early childhood education, health care, nutrition, and childcare, primarily delivered through Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). The major components of ICDS include supplementary nutrition for children and expectant or nursing mothers, pre-school education for children aged 3–6 years at AWCs, immunization and regular health check-ups, and health and nutrition education for parents and community members. These integrated services aim to ensure the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of children, while also empowering women with better health awareness and practices.

Today, ICDS has grown into one of the world's largest community-based outreach programmes, with over 1.36 million Anganwadi Centres across India, serving millions of children below six years of age, as well as pregnant and lactating women. Through its multifaceted approach, the scheme continues to play a crucial role in enhancing child well-being and laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development.

2. Balvatika / Pre-School Education under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

The Balvatika or Pre-School Education initiative, introduced under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, aims to ensure foundational learning for children aged 3 to 6 years before they enter formal schooling. It seeks to bridge the gap between early childhood care and primary education by providing a stimulating and child-friendly environment for holistic development. The programme follows a play-based and activity-oriented curriculum that nurtures curiosity, creativity, and social interaction among young learners. It emphasizes the development of language and communication skills, early numeracy, and socio-emotional competencies, which form the basis for lifelong learning. Additionally, special attention is given to teacher training and capacity-building to equip educators with the skills required to engage children effectively in experiential learning activities.

Integrated with the Foundational Stage framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Balvatika ensures smooth continuity from pre-school to primary education. By aligning early learning goals with the broader vision of NEP 2020, this initiative plays a vital role in laying a strong educational foundation and preparing every child for formal schooling with confidence and readiness.

Poshan Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission, 2018)

Launched in 2018, the Poshan Abhiyaan, also known as the National Nutrition Mission, aims to improve nutritional outcomes for children below six years of age, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women. It focuses on reducing stunting, wasting, and malnutrition during the critical early years of life. By promoting awareness about health, hygiene, and nutrition among caregivers, the mission seeks to ensure that every child receives a healthy start. The programme also works in close coordination with the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) to provide a strong and healthy foundation essential for effective learning and development in early childhood.

Early Childhood Care and Education Centres (ECCE Centres)

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Centres aim to provide quality pre-primary education, particularly in rural and underserved areas. These centres emphasize a developmentally appropriate and child-centred pedagogy, focusing on play, creativity, and exploration as the core of early learning experiences. By engaging the community, parents, and local stakeholders, ECCE Centres foster a supportive environment that nurtures children's holistic growth — cognitive, emotional, physical, and social — while preparing them for formal schooling.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme (Indirect ECCE Support)

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme serves as an indirect support mechanism for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) by ensuring that children entering primary schools after pre-school education receive adequate nutrition. Its primary objective is to improve nutritional intake and promote school attendance, especially among economically disadvantaged groups. By addressing hunger and enhancing children's

concentration and participation in class, the scheme contributes significantly to growth, learning readiness, and overall well-being.

National Bal Bhavan Programmes

The National Bal Bhavan Programmes aim to foster creative, cultural, and holistic development among children aged 6 to 16 years, with a focus on early exposure to arts and culture. Through a variety of co-curricular and activity-based learning opportunities, the programme nurtures creativity, imagination, social interaction, and physical development. By providing a space for self-expression and exploration, it complements early childhood education efforts, helping children grow into confident, well-rounded individuals.

Conclusion

The landscape of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India has undergone a significant transformation—evolving from a welfare-oriented model to a rights-based, holistic approach that integrates care, health, nutrition, and education. This shift is clearly reflected in key policy frameworks such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013), the Right to Education Act (2009), and most recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. These policies collectively emphasize the importance of the foundational years (ages 0–8) and advocate for play-based, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive learning experiences.

Despite considerable progress in expanding access through schemes like ICDS, Balvatika, and Poshan Abhiyaan, the implementation of ECCE continues to face persistent challenges. Issues such as uneven service quality, inadequate infrastructure, workforce capacity gaps, and socio-linguistic barriers hinder the realization of equitable and high-quality early learning opportunities, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

To bridge the gap between policy intent and ground-level delivery, the study recommends:

- Strengthening teacher training and professional development
- Improving monitoring and evaluation systems
- Enhancing convergence between health, nutrition, and education services
- Promoting active community and parental engagement

Ultimately, achieving the vision of equitable, high-quality ECCE in India requires sustained public investment, coordinated multi-sectoral action, and context-sensitive implementation models that are responsive to local realities. By prioritizing the early years, India can not only improve educational outcomes but also foster lifelong well-being, social equity, and national development.

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