

Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract

This article reflects critically on some of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead concerning Early Childhood Care and Education in India from a perspective of social work in the context of NEP 2020. It projects the crucial role a social worker may play in mitigating some of these systemic inequities and ensuring equitable access to quality services in ECCE. It advocates that there needs to be a social work perspective imbued within both the inclusionist and qualitative objectives set out by the NEP on early childhood education, examining, through a lens of the social determinants of learning, how diverse child populations are affected by cultural contexts and socio-economic disparities. Analyses in the paper stand on the shoulders of research and available policy frameworks with an understanding of India's unique socio-cultural context. It points out the need for the sensitization of practice that addresses the specific needs of excluded groups of children and therefore the creation of an effective, sustainable system. Finally, the article calls for incorporation of the principles of social work in the development and execution of policies on ECCE at both national and state levels, positioning social workers as agents of change in the transformation of early childhood education in India.

Keywords: *Early childhood care and education, perspective of social work, inequities, equitable access, quality services, National Education Policy.*

Introduction

The socio-economic landscape of India is very diverse, with a rapidly growing population that presents both significant challenges and opportunities for early childhood development (Li et al., 2016). The early childhood period is critical for cognitive, emotional, and social growth; thus,

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Early Childhood Care and Education programs are highly important to lay a proper foundation for the future well-being of children (K & SHUBHRA, 2019, pp. 1-11). Despite their importance, these aspects have often been largely overlooked from a social work point of view; even as they bear immense relevance for children, their families, educators, and society in general, equal opportunity in accessing quality ECCE services is also one of social justice. With their holistic perspectives and commitments to social justice, social workers are in a privileged position to contribute to the enhancement of research, policy development, and administration of the ECCE system in India for effectiveness and sustainability.

The National Education Policy-2020 envisions transforming India's education system into one that provides holistic development and equal opportunity, especially in the field of early childhood education. The new structure of 5+3+3+4 will have a robust component of Early Childhood Care and Education for children from age three to eight that shall focus on play, activity, and inquiry-based learning for the holistic development of children. The third year of Early Childhood Care and Education will be a preparatory class called Balvatika. In the process, it's envisioned that the approach toward education at the Early Childhood Care and Education level would be flexible, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based. In general, the overall aim of ECCE is to ensure optimum development outcomes in diverse domains like physical and motor, cognitive abilities, socio-emotional and ethical development, and cultural, artistic, communication, early language, literacy, and numeracy skills. Foundational Stage covers five years of learning experiences of children in the age group of three to eight years with flexibility for play and activity-based learning inherent in the ECCE curriculum and pedagogies. Additionally, the medium of instruction (MOI) will prioritize the home language, mother tongue, or regional language until at least Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8 and beyond, thereby ensuring that this approach is uniformly applied in both public and private schools. A multilingual environment will be encouraged, and teachers will be encouraged to adopt bilingual strategies, and use bilingual teaching materials also, especially for those whose home language is different from the medium of instruction. The Action Plan for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Foundational Stage, in tune with the curricular design, focuses on a number of priorities that are vital in ensuring upward curricular continuity and enhancement in learning outcomes from pre-primary to primary. Central to this project is the development of such a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, which eschews any formal instruction in the three Rs, thereby reconceptualizing the Foundational Mission of early learning to go well beyond mere literacy and numeracy. The plan advocates for an integrated curriculum at the level of primary

education, a separate cadre of Foundation Stage teachers, including both preschool and primary teachers, and an increase in training institutions. The quality standards, budgeting, and regulatory systems are also to be specifically designed for the Foundational Stage. This includes, but is not limited to, the availability of adequately trained and committed teachers at the Anganwadi itself for preschool education, mechanisms for seamless convergence with the Ministry of Women and Child Development on matters regarding issues inherent in a two-management system, etc (*Salient Features of NEP, 2020, n.d.*). To further ensure the highest quality of education, all primary heads and teachers shall undertake ECCE training on their own to bring up equitable quality across the four education models. It will finally develop a communication strategy that will raise awareness among parents regarding the importance of quality ECCE and the need to develop good parenting practices (Mandal, 2021).

Recognizing the foundational role of ECCE, the policy thus advocates for its universalization. However, realizing this vision can mean treading through various complexities, involving socio-economic disparities, diversity of cultures, and, finally, infrastructural complications. This paper argues that a social work perspective, with its emphases on social justice, community involvement, and systemic analysis, is intrinsic to the realization of ambitious goals set by NEP 2020. In this respect, social work has much to contribute toward developing equitable and sustainable ECCE systems that meet the diverse needs of the most marginalized and disadvantaged children.

Review of Literature

ECCE is recognized globally as the foundation for lifelong learning and development (Kennedy & Lee, 2018). The National Education Policy 2020 in India has placed a strong emphasis on early childhood education as one of the most critical ways to reduce inequity and ensure inclusiveness in education. This literature review synthesizes extant research on the juncture of social work with ECCE in India in the backdrop of NEP 2020 and explains the challenges and emergent opportunities from this synthesis. Research has repeatedly shown that early childhood education lays the foundation for later cognitive, social, and emotional development; UNICEF estimates that there are huge disparities in accessing early education and its quality, which affect marginalized communities in India more (UNICEF, 2019). Dunder a study in South Asian educational systems and identifies the causes and correlates of student learning outcomes. The study shows that children from poorer backgrounds typically start primary school with significant delays in their overall development, further increasing inequality in a generation (Dunder, 2014). Addressing such disparities,

therefore, through effective ECCE programs should be of the highest order in fostering equal opportunities for educational outcomes. NEP 2020 has laid down a vast framework of reforming the educational scenario in India, with a strong emphasis on early childhood care and education. It advocates for an integrated system of health, nutrition, and education. The cross-sectoral collaboration among education, health, and social services is required for the successful implementation of NEP 2020 (Singha & Dubey, 2024).

Social work is the backbone that helps in addressing different challenges affecting children and their families when trying to access quality early childhood education. Studies have shown that social workers increase community participation, influence the need for policy changes, and offer direct services to families as they work to navigate the educational system (Gasper & Walker, 2020, p. 56). Besides, social work interventions may facilitate an increase in service use and enhance parenting involvement. Social workers have a better vantage position to raise and challenge inequities in the system. (Lindsay, 2009). Social workers are in a better place to raise and challenge inequities in the system. This is, for instance, documented by showing how social work initiatives have bridged service gaps in the delivery of services related to children with disabilities or those from low-income families (Reichow et al., 2016). By using culturally appropriate approaches, social workers are in a position to provide an enabling environment that embraces diversity in background and needs. Despite the fact that social work has the potential to bring transformative changes in ECCE within India, a number of stumbling blocks continue on the ground. Resource limitations, inadequately prepared social workers, and an overall lack of awareness of the importance of early childhood education obstruct further the development process. Systemic barriers in educational systems are other obstacles that hamper the road to inclusive practice under NEP 2020.

The extant literature highlights that social work may have an important role to play in the reduction of inequities and in the advance of inclusivity within early childhood education in India under the NEP 2020 framework. Though there are many challenges, the collaborative efforts of social workers, educators, policy framers, and communities might have a better chance of creating a more equitable and inclusive ECCE system. Future research needs to be directed at the assessment of interventions by social work in the setting of ECCE to better inform policy and practice. This literature review goes in-depth with the junction of social work and early childhood education in the framing of NEP 2020 in India. It highlights not only the crucial role that social work should play in combating inequalities and advancing inclusivity but also some of the challenges that need to be

Challenges and Systemic Inequities:

Various challenges impede the establishment of robust Early Childhood Care and Education systems in India. These are linked to systemic inequities at different levels that place already disadvantaged populations, especially from marginalized communities, at a further disadvantage. A deeper look indicates that barriers are multidimensional in nature and call for targeted interventions if all children are to have equitable access to quality early education (SWARGIARY, 2024).

Socioeconomic Disparities

Socio-economic status remains a key determinant of access to quality ECCE services in India. Families from low-income backgrounds often cannot afford the high fees charged by private preschools or daycare centers, which tend to be better equipped with resources and trained staff. For instance, a study done in Uttar Pradesh reported that children from rich families were three times more likely than children from poor families to attend a high-quality early childhood education program. In rural areas, the situation is worse. Most villages lack school facilities or trained educators, so it's either no early education for some children or informal, underregulated child care that falls short of meeting developmental minimums (Kaul & Bhattacharjea, 2019).

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles further complicate the inequalities within ECCE. In most communities, the social expectation foisted on women is that of caregiving, again a serious barrier to their employment and participation in educational programs themselves. For example, in certain regions of Rajasthan, there is an expectation for girls to engage in household chores rather than attend preschool, leading to disparities in education based on gender. This not only inhibits girls' early educational opportunities but also perpetuates the stereotype of women's roles in society by creating a cycle of disadvantage well into future generations (MEHTA, 2023, p. 174).

Quality of ECCE Services

Most often, the quality of services for ECCE has been compromised in India as a result of the gross shortage of adequately trained staff teachers and caregivers. Moreover, most preschools take underqualified staff who remain incompetent in developing a responding and stimulating learning environment at school. According to the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, nearly 60% of preschool teachers in India

do not receive formal training in early childhood education. This deficit directly contributes to the low quality of education imparted to children, especially in far-flung areas with little access to professional training (Jha, 2020).

Inadequate Funding and Infrastructure

The development of effective ECCE systems is further hampered by funding constraints. Government investment in early childhood education remains disproportionately low when compared to other sectors. For instance, while the NEP 2020 stresses a strong foundation for ECCE, the actual budget allocation for preschool education has not increased appreciably so far (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). Accordingly, a greater percentage of the ECCE centers are marked by a general lack of the needed resources and physical provisions, which include teaching-learning materials, space for play that is adequate, and proper sanitation (Kaul & Bhattacharjea, 2019).

Inadequate Comprehensive Policy Framework

India does not have a comprehensive national policy framework on ECCE; this has resulted in poor coordination among various agencies responsible for implementing early childhood programs. The services are fragmented, and such fragmentation leads to inconsistencies in program quality and accessibility (Creches, 2020). For instance, although the ICDS scheme aimed at ensuring comprehensive care for under-six children, it has varied between states because of varying local structures of governance and resource allocation. The result has been confusion among families over the services available, weakening the efforts to have an integrated system of ECCE.

Accessibility and Inclusivity Issues

Accessibility and inclusivity remain some key concerns in the ECCE landscape. Most significantly, children with disabilities represent serious systemic barriers to get them into appropriate educational settings. According to a survey carried out by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), only 20% of children with disabilities attend any form of early childhood program. Children of diverse linguistic backgrounds may also find it very challenging to adjust to the mainstream settings of ECCE where regional languages or English are predominantly used in instruction, further marginalizing them. It calls for responding to the challenges that are interrelated with each other in creating a system of equity for ECCE to support the development and learning of all Indian children. Targeted interventions should ensure not only accessibility and enhancement of service quality but also inclusiveness

in social policy. In addition, in order to ease the burden of socioeconomic disparity, cultural norms, unprepared educators, lack of funds, fragmented policy frameworks, and accessibility issues, stakeholders should create an inclusive early childhood education landscape where every child truly benefits (NCPEDP, 2021).

The Social Work Perspective of ECCE in India

This paper adopts a social work framework in the critical analysis of the issue of ECCE in India, with the core values underlined for social work: social justice, equality, and empowerment. By anchoring the analysis within these principles, we will be better able to grasp the various complexities and challenges inherent within the ECCE landscape in India.

Perspective Person-in-Environment

At the core of this analysis, there is a person-in-environment perspective that highlights how the individual child needs, family circumstances, and general socio-economic situations within diverse and multi-dimensional Indian landscapes are all linked with each other. Take the instance of a young boy coming from a family living in poverty in the countryside area of Bihar State: clearly, his possibility to be guaranteed quality ECCE will not only depend on his own, such as preparedness for entering primary school, or parental assistance in child upbringing. Instead, it is deeply shaped by systemic issues of poverty, a lack of trained providers, and infrastructure. It was also revealed that most children in poverty usually attend informal childcare arrangements with little or no scope of educational frameworks, thus impacting their overall development opportunities.

Through the person-in-environment framework (Karls & O'Keefe, 2008) a, we avoid simplistic, individually based explanations for the shortcomings within families. This perspective encourages an integrated understanding of how socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and local policies interactively determine the access and quality of ECCE services. The articles in this issue critically analyze the systemic factors that influence the ECCE landscape in India. For instance, the ICDS program, though envisioned to offer integrated services for children below six years of age, in practice falls short because of poor implementation across states. A case study from Madhya Pradesh showed that though anganwadi centers are supposed to provide supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, and early childhood education, most function with inadequate infrastructure and poorly trained workers. This systemic failure is reflected in findings of the National Institute of Nutrition, which report that nearly 40% of the ICDS centers lack basic educational materials and safe areas for playing. This

has consequences not only for children's immediate learning experiences but also for their overall long-term development.

Importantly, these articles also discuss how often the work of ECCE has been essentialized and considered as "women's work" even as it requires so much sophisticated knowledge and expertise to do well. In the process, it subsumes the professional status of educators and caregivers involved in the services. For example, a qualitative study among women educators in Tamil Nadu revealed that many female educators felt undervalued and underappreciated for their roles in shaping young minds. These educators often have advanced degrees and specialized training but are frequently relegated to the lower status because of belief in gender roles.

This analysis challenges the existing framing that reduces ECCE into a domestic chore, creating room for a more equitable framing of the work. It draws attention to the need for recognition of the competence needed in early childhood education and calls for improved working conditions and professional development for educators. This paper is a call to action through advocacy and collaboration across various groups, from providers and parents to academics, funders, policymakers, and activists, for the betterment of existing systems and practices in ECCE. Social workers are the crucial policy practitioners who can facilitate the communication between these diverse groups; building the bridges (Thomas, 2024).

Social Work Values and the Imperative for Equitable Early Childhood Care and Education in India

While the prevalence of non-parental childcare prior to formal schooling varies globally, the worldwide trend demonstrates increasing participation. This reality, linked with the prevalent part-time or full-time employment of parents in most families, underlines the practical need for Early Childhood Care and Education systems. However, beyond the logistical necessity, provision of ECCE is an issue of critical social and economic justice. As in other parts of the world, early childhood education and care are provided in India by low-waged, precarious workers; these workers are largely female, migrant, and of racial/ethnic minorities—a trend that perpetuates existing inequalities. Poorly paid carers who are likely to be poor themselves may feel demotivated and excluded, leading to negative implications for young children's quality of care. Moreover, the very families who are poor or geographically isolated and thus need quality early childhood programs the most are usually the last or least served. This disparity raises a fundamental question: is Early Childhood Care and Education a public good or a private resource?

The Indian government has not based its approach on solid research

towards ECCE, nor is it unified, and publicly subsidized as many countries in the developed world have. In the present regime of fragmentation, coupled with underfunding and a paucity of programs, inequities have evolved with great significant. Programs across the country do not equally serve all Indian children like a majority of the developed countries who achieve nearly universal access in ECCE. Such contrasts reveal enormous gaps between highly available resources and pressing public needs for vulnerable children to come from disadvantaged sections in society and rarely getting served quality programs. This failure to guarantee comprehensive high- quality ECCE services to all children indicates a crucial social justice issue that is in dire need of address.

Social Work Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in India

As in many other contexts, ECCE in India is embedded in complex interpersonal relationships. These connections make a difference in the discourses of ECCE often implicitly rather than explicitly. Closeness between children, families, and providers can be highly beneficial but also brings several challenges. The personal nature of contact in ECCE often sustains the facilitation of a distributed leadership model, as was evident in the recent discussions. The same personal nature of this contact often incidentally reinforces that caregiving is a private issue rather than a critical public issue (Ponnuswami & Francis, 2021).

Due to its roots in professional helping relationships, social workers are notably quick at analyzing complex nuances involved within the ECCE. Historically, early social reformers focused on family dynamics and relationships impelled by humanitarian and pragmatic interests. For example, though the need for childcare among poor families was recognized, it often was constructed as a residual need that diminished the value of non-parental care and the worth of caregivers. From a social work perspective, understanding ECCE dynamics requires examining the interplay between individual choices, workplace conditions, cultural norms, community structures, and broader social policies. In the context of India, this now suggests that there is another tension in the policies: Caregivers may find wages increased on many occasions at the cost of reduced hours for staff and/or compromised staff-to-child ratios-features that may make for a compromised quality of care and affecting the welfare of children. To deal with such a contingency, this situation calls urgently for policies in comprehensive childcare, as also encompassing the related interests of children, their families, and providers themselves under one broad-based framing, including society as a whole. A strong policy approach would therefore need to investigate the complex relationships within

ECCE settings and also focus on the broader social, economic, and cultural conditions that shape these relationships and their consequences. This holistic approach is a dire need for creating equitable and quality ECCE systems for all children and their families in India (S. Khanra Jha, 2024).

The Critical Role of Social Workers in Fostering Equitable Early Childhood Care and Education in India

Social workers will therefore be the crucial workers to address the challenges of ensuring equitable access to quality ECCE in India. The multidimensional skills will thus help them in addressing systemic inequities and empower families through a variety of strategies:

1. **Advocacy and Policy Reform:** Social workers can become active in policy reform by advocating for a policy framework that ensures all children receive quality ECCE. It includes, but is not limited to, addressing infrastructural bottlenecks and increasing fiscal allocation toward such programs.
2. **Community Participation and Empowerment:** The social workers could engage the families and communities so that identified needs are directly addressed; hence, making the program culturally sensitive and relevant for ECCE programs.
3. **Inclusive Practices:** Social workers work to ensure that children with disabilities, those from different linguistic backgrounds, and other marginalized groups are also welcome in the inclusive environment of the ECCE programs.
4. **Workforce Strengthening:** The entities have been very instrumental in providing training, support, and mentorship for ECCE professionals, something that acts as a very vital component to delivering quality and culturally appropriate care.
5. **Understanding Social Determinants of Learning:** Social workers understand that socioeconomic factors, community structures, and family support systems create an ecology for the young child's development. These insights will be invaluable in the formulation of evidence-based policy and equitable ECCE programming.
6. **Interdisciplinary Approaches and Coordination:** Social workers will coordinate government agencies, NGOs, families, and the community to ensure that efforts toward ECCE are unifying and efficient.

The unique perspective of social workers definitely enriches the field of ECCE. They emphasize a holistic approach, which not only looks at the individual in the community but also the policy linkages.

Their key competencies rest in ensuring that collaborative and

participatory decision-making on behalf of diverse stakeholders lies at the heart of an effective ECCE, whether it comes to the execution or the sustainability of interventions. Additionally, it is also hoped that sharing these experiences will strengthen efforts to create just and equitable opportunities for all children in the realms of early childhood development. Social workers could, therefore, play a transformative role in the field of early childhood education in India through advocacy, community engagement, inclusivity efforts, workforce strengthening, attention to social determinants, and collaborative approaches that shape a more equitable future.

A Social Work Perspective Aligned with NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 emphasis on holistic child development and equitable access is in perfect sync with the crucial role that social work plays in shaping appropriate ECCE systems in India. Social workers are needed at the forefront of implementing these guiding principles of NEP into practice within the cultural landscape of India, in that they are specially trained for creating supportive environments, maintaining emotional well-being, and recognizing the social determinants of learning. A truly inclusive system of ECCE would have to recognize and then address the entrenched diversity in Indian society. This would mean meeting the special needs of children with disability, children from diverse linguistic groups, and those from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Social workers are well-placed to lead the way in practices that are inclusive beyond mere recognition, acting in the creation of culturally responsive environments which allow all children to feel a sense of belonging.

This requires consideration of the various cultural norms, values, and traditions within India. The culturally sensitive ECCE programs should, therefore, actively include these aspects and look at them as strengths that enhance the learning environment rather than something to be avoided in order to prevent conflicts. Most importantly, this calls for challenging harmful stereotypes, especially those feeding into gender inequalities. Social workers can concretely help provide equal opportunities for all children by analyzing and dismantling deeply ingrained, gendered expectations and roles of each community. This presupposes a critical look at the power dynamics and how the preexisting structures either perpetuate or work against these stereotypes. Engagement with families and communities in program development is a necessary condition for the latter to be responsive to particular needs. It involves the participation of community members in the design and delivery of programs, consideration of cultural diversity in designing curriculum and pedagogical approaches, and linguistic diversity.

Effective communication and collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries are critical for the establishment of inclusive environments. The goal, finally, would be to see an environment in ECCE showcasing rich cultural diversity, where each and every child gets the opportunity to prosper fully. The NEP 2020 framework has some great length; this warrants continuous effort by social workers-coming together-to assure translated vision for quality Early Childhood Care and Education across the breadth and width of the nation.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020 presents a seminal opportunity to reframe ECCE in India; how far this actually succeeds depends on a nuanced understanding of the multi-layered challenges that come inherently with the Indian context. Whereas the NEP 2020 rightly recognizes the imperative of equitable access and holistic development, the realization of this vision requires much more than mere policy pronouncements. The active engagement and expertise of social workers are the significant elements for this transformation. Social workers, with their deep understanding of social justice, community engagement, and cultural sensitivity, are uniquely positioned to address the systemic inequities that currently hinder equitable access to quality ECCE. This requires a nuanced understanding of the intricate connections between socioeconomic status, cultural contexts, and the diverse developmental needs of children. Effective ECCE programs need to move away from purely logistic approaches and adopt a more holistic perspective in their work, considering the complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. Social workers can be very important in making this happen by advocating for equitable policies, fostering inclusive practices, and empowering communities to take part in shaping their children's futures. This would involve direct work with marginalized communities, addressing cultural sensitivities, and supporting families through the complexities of accessing quality ECCE. It is also important that culturally responsive environments be created that celebrate diversity, recognize the needs of children with disabilities, and actively challenge harmful gender stereotypes. What can ultimately ensure the realization of the NEP 2020 is ongoing collaboration among social workers, educators, policymakers, and communities. Further research into the specific needs of the various communities in India becomes important in informing policy decisions, program design, and strategies for implementation. By prioritizing the linked socioeconomic factors, cultural contexts, and child development through continued interdisciplinary collaboration, it would be possible to enable India to create an ECCE system that will foster the whole development of each and every child, forming a sounder basis for a high-

quality future. The NEP 2020 sets out that framework; the dedicated and collective effort by social workers, educators, and communities in general are what will fulfill this aspiration.

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