



Overhauling Early Childhood Education

This editorial is based on [“The economic case for investing in India’s children”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 29/02/2024. The article discusses the necessity for heightened attention to early childhood care and education, emphasising the requirement for greater investment in this area.

For Prelims: [Early Childhood Care and Education \(ECCE\)](#), [Integrated Child Development Services \(ICDS\)](#), [National Education Policy 2020](#), [National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning](#), [PRAGYATA](#), [PM SHRI Schools](#), [National Family Health Survey-5](#), [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), [Artificial Intelligence](#).

For Mains: State of Elementary Education in India, Need for Adequate Investments.

[Early Childhood Care and Education \(ECCE\)](#) has remained both under-invested and under-explored over decades despite it seeming self-evident that India’s children deserve economic investment, given the country’s focus on demographic dividend, education and jobs.

ECCE is often limited to the household domain, perhaps because it has traditionally been women’s work. With the increasing focus by the government on women-led development, care work and early childhood are finally being seen as part of the critical work of running a country.

What is the Current Status of ECCE?

- **Free and Compulsory Education:**
 - The Constitution makes the following provisions under [Article 45](#) of the [Directive Principles of State Policy \(DPSP\)](#) that, “The state shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory Education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.”
- **Improvements in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER):**
 - The argument for increased investment in ECCE is a basic one - human resources are the bedrock of a nation, and early childhood is the bedrock of a human being. Slowly, but surely, the Indian developmental state has fostered and catered to parental aspirations for education, targeting first access, crossing 100% GER at the primary level.
- **Dilemmas in Learning Outcomes:**
 - In recent times, there has been increased focus on measuring learning outcomes. The [National Sample Survey Office \(NSSO\)](#) (75th Round) data and the learning outcomes study of the NCERT ([National Achievement Survey, 2023](#)) (along with [ASER Report 2023](#)) show that India’s children are not learning at the primary stage, and as they move to higher levels, they are struggling to cope with the curriculum.
- **Enhanced Focus for Children-Under-Six:**
 - Government has made significant strides in focusing even earlier in the life cycle, i.e., children under six, leading to initiatives such as the [National Initiative for Proficiency](#)

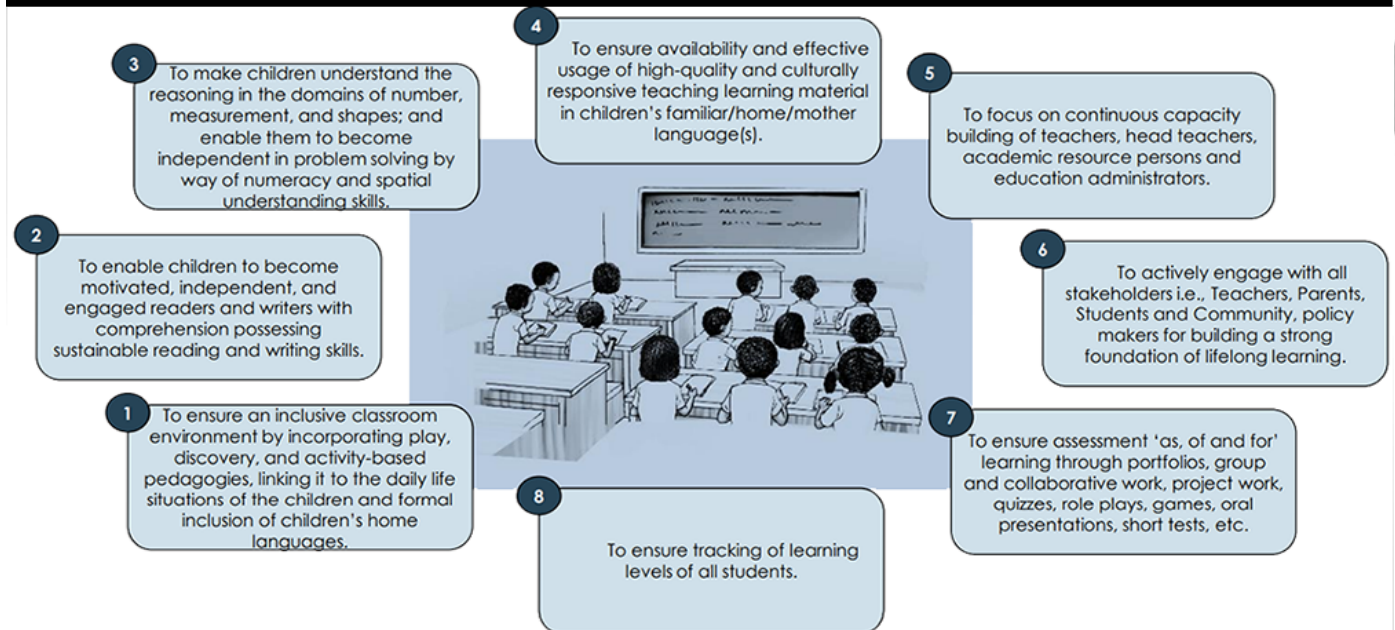
[in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy \(NIPUN\) Bharat Mission](#) for foundational literacy and numeracy, and the program - [Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi](#) to improve ECCE quality through the Anganwadi system.

Note

Poshan Bhi, Padhai Bhi:

- Promoting early stimulation during the first thousand days and facilitating ECCE for children aged 3 to 6 years.
- Enhancing the capacities of Anganwadi workers by providing them with a foundational understanding of ECCE curricula and pedagogical approaches. This enables them to deliver high-quality play-based ECCE at the grassroots level.
 - Anganwadi is a type of rural child care center in India. It was established as part of the [Integrated Child Development Services \(ICDS\)](#) program.
- To enable Anganwadi Workers to focus on the domains of development (physical and motor, cognitive, socio-emotional-ethical, cultural/artistic), and the development of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), as well as related assessments.
- To reinforce Anganwadi workers' understanding of nutrition, including [Poshan 2.0](#) and [Saksham Anganwadi](#), innovations in [Poshan](#), [Poshan Tracker](#), feeding practices, micronutrient deficiencies etc.

Objectives of the Mission



▪ **Budgetary Allocations:**

- The interim Budget 2024's promise of expediting the upgradation of **Saksham Anganwadis** and providing [Ayushman Bharat](#) services for Anganwadi workers, [Accredited Social Health Activist \(ASHA\)](#), and helpers is encouraging.
 - In 2023, the outlay for teaching-learning materials tripled, increasing from approximately Rs 140 crore to Rs 420 crore per annum, assuming 14 lakh Anganwadi centres, catering to India's poorest eight crore children under six.

▪ **Disparities in Fund Allocations Compared to Higher Education:**

- The 2024-25 budgeted expenditure on centrally sponsored schemes, which form a substantial part of Centre-State fiscal transfers, is Rs 5.01 lakh crore. Of this, the Anganwadi system is allocated about Rs 21,200 crore, which is more than rural roads (Rs 12,000 crore) and irrigation (Rs 11,391 crore).

- But this is less than the National Education Mission (Rs 37,500 crore) and the [National Health Mission](#) (Rs 38,183 crore). The Department of Higher Education receives around Rs 47,619 crore, for a total of approximately four crore enrolled learners, who undoubtedly come from the more privileged sections of Indian society.

What are the Different Challenges to ECCE In India?

▪ **Affordability:**

- According to recent research, the total cost of educating a child in a private school from the age of 3 to 17 in India amounts to a staggering Rs 30 lakh. Early childcare costs in India can often constitute around 20-30%. These expenses' financial burdens hinder investments in ECCE.
- The NSSO's 75th Round report reveals that around 37 million children lack access to any form of early education service, regardless of public or private options.

▪ **Accessibility:**

- Traditional early learning formats such as preschools and daycare are not always accessible to all families due to factors like geographical location or traditional child-rearing practices. Moreover, India needs more skilled early-learning educators and essential infrastructure.

▪ **Availability:**

- While there has been an increase in government investment in ECCE in India, including the establishment of digital labs and infrastructure, the challenges persist. ECCE in the country is marked by regulatory gaps, fragmentation, and the need for targeted initiatives, underscoring opportunities for enhancement.

▪ **Low Parental Engagement:**

- Parents are a child's first teachers, and they can help their child learn in many ways like teaching them to read, write and count. They can also help them develop social skills by spending time together at home or out in the community.
- However, they often face challenges in getting involved in their children's education such as work schedules that don't allow for much time away from work; lack of transportation; low literacy skills; not knowing where or how to get information about early childhood education programs.

▪ **Lacunae in Right to Education Act, (RTE) 2009:**

- The **86th Constitutional Amendment Act** passed in 2002, made the right to primary education a **fundamental right under Article 21(A)**. This amendment aimed to provide free and compulsory education to children between the ages of six and fourteen.
 - It was further supported by the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, also known as the RTE Act**, which was passed in 2009 and came into effect in 2010 .
- However, this Act did not accommodate sufficient provisions for foundational literacy and numeracy and early childhood care and education for children in the age group of upto 6 years.

▪ **Low Public Spending:**

- The [Incheon Declaration](#) to which India is a signatory, expects member states to spend 4-6% of their [GDP](#) on education to achieve [SDG-4 \(Quality Education\)](#) to this declaration.
- However, the Union Budget 2024 budget allocates only around 2.9 % of the GDP to education, significantly lower than the global average of 4.7 %.

What are the Suggestions for Reforming ECCE?

▪ **Utilising Digital Penetration:**

- **Offers Engaging and Age Appropriate Content:** The availability of smartphones and internet connectivity has grown remarkably. Digital learning platforms are emerging as dynamic tools catering specifically to early learners.
 - These apps offer engaging and age-appropriate content, ensuring an enriching educational experience for young minds.
 - This connectivity allows the delivery of educational content directly to parents and

caregivers, enhancing their capacity to engage in their children's early learning journey.

- **Promotes Inclusivity and Accessibility:** Through interactive activities, vibrant visuals, and tailored curricula, these platforms shape how children embark on their learning journey.

- The learning modules offered through digitization offer cost-effectiveness and convenient access from virtually anywhere, reaching children and qualified educators from across geographies.
- Their advent makes quality early learning education more inclusive by breaking physical barriers and reaching a wider range of children and educators.

- **Filling Infrastructural Gaps:**

- This calls for initiating comprehensive teacher training programmes and career progression strategies through established institutions, alongside investments in necessary infrastructure.
 - Additionally, ECE would benefit significantly from creating specialised laboratories, modern learning centres, play areas, digital resources, and innovative learning materials for early learners.
- Expanding ECE centres to accommodate India's growing population and implementing structured curricula, well-trained educators, and clear learning objectives. These foundational elements are crucial to address the existing constraints.



- **Recognising Diversity in Approaches:**

- Early childhood education is versatile, accommodating various family circumstances and preferences. It encompasses a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from parents providing care and education at home to leveraging informal or formal gamified learning methods.
- Larger preschool setups also play a crucial role in providing structured learning experiences. Recognising this diversity in approaches is pivotal to creating a comprehensive and inclusive framework for childcare and early education.

- **Need For Investments:**

- **Investments in Anganwadi Centres:** Recent researches provide further cause for expanding allocation and expenditure by the Centre and the States.
 - Quasi-experimental impact evaluations using existing survey data have proven cognitive and motor skills improvement in Anganwadi-attending children over others, particularly reducing gender and income-related gaps.
 - According to a study in 2020, children exposed to the Anganwadi system from ages zero to three go on to complete 0.1-0.3 more grades of school.
- **For Strengthening ECCE System:**

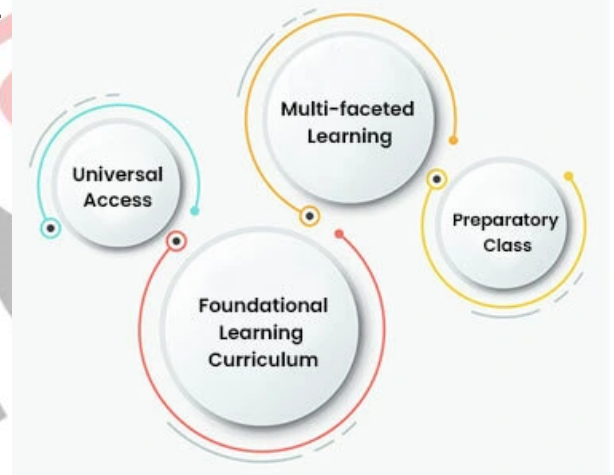
- To determine what to spend on — infrastructure, capacity building, materials, and staffing — it is necessary to match the micro to the macro, the amounts in paise to the amounts in lakh and crore.
- Estimates are required of the potential gains to GDP from the proven individual benefits of strong ECCE: improving women’s physical and mental health, lifespan, public health expenditure, children’s educational attainment, their physical and mental health, and even social unrest.
 - Nobel Laureate Heckman’s Perry Preschool study found that children who received high quality ECCE grew into less violent adults — stronger socio-emotional skills built early might even help prevent later student suicides.

▪ **Need for Research in ECCE:**

- There is also a clear need for systematic rigorous research in the Indian context, building on the work of leading academics on the macroeconomic and social implications of early childhood development.
 - In order to formulate evidence-based policy, it is critical to understand the opportunity cost of inadequate allocation of material resources, money, and high-quality talent to the early childhood sector.
- India needs to conduct longitudinal studies exploring the impact of early childhood care, including the Anganwadi system, which remains the world’s largest public provisioning system for ECCE.

▪ **Effectively Implementing the Mandate of NEP, 2020:**

- Over 85% of a child's cumulative brain growth takes place in the first six years, according to the **NEP, 2020**, which emphasises the necessity of providing the brain with the right care and stimulation in the early years to promote a child's holistic development.
- The updated policy states that it is urgently necessary to provide all young children with nationwide access to high-quality ECCE, with a particular focus on kids from socioeconomically disadvantaged households.



- **Foundational Learning Curriculum:** The curriculum is split into two sections for ages 3 to 8: foundation learning curriculum for ECCE students from ages 3-6 and classes I and II for primary school students from ages 6 to 8.
- **Universal Access:** All kids between the ages of 3 and 6 have access to free, secure, and high-quality ECCE at pre-schools, anganwadis, and Balvatikas.
- **Preparatory Class:** Every child will be relocated to a "Preparatory Class" or "Balvatika" (before Class 1) before the age of five, where ECCE-qualified teachers would impart play-based learning.
- **Multi-faceted Learning:** A flexible learning method with a heavy emphasis on play, activity, and inquiry-based learning to build Foundational Literacy & Numeracy (FLN).

Conclusion

Investing in ECCE is crucial for India's future, yet it has been overlooked for years. Recognizing ECCE as fundamental to human development, the government has started focusing on this area, evident in initiatives like NIPUN Bharat and Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi. The recent budgetary allocation for ECCE shows a

positive trend, but more is needed, considering the proven benefits such as improved cognitive skills and educational attainment.

Research in the Indian context is essential to understand the full impact and formulate effective policies. As India aims for development milestones, investing in ECCE will be pivotal in ensuring a prosperous future for its children and the nation.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the challenges and initiatives in improving elementary education quality and access in India. What role can technology play in this?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Consider the following statements: (2018)

1. As per the Right to Education (RTE) Act, to be eligible for appointment as a teacher in a State, a person would be required to possess the minimum qualification laid down by the concerned State Council of Teacher Education.
2. As per the RTE Act, for teaching primary classes, a candidate is required to pass a Teacher Eligibility Test conducted in accordance with the National Council of Teacher Education guidelines.
3. In India, more than 90% of teacher education institutions are directly under the State Governments.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
(b) 2 only
(c) 1 and 3
(d) 3 only

Ans: (b)

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 3, 4 and 5 only
(c) 1, 2 and 5 only
(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q. National Education Policy 2020 is in conformity with the Sustainable Development Goal-4 (2030). It intends to restructure and reorient education system in India. Critically examine the statement. (2020)

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