



Mains Practice Question

Q. Evaluate the present condition of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India. What reforms would you suggest to ensure a prosperous future for children in the country? (250 words)

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Approach

- Start the answer with a discussion that sets a context for the question.
- Discuss the present condition of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India.
- Suggest reforms to ensure a prosperous future for children in the country
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

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.

Body

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 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:** The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) (75th Round) data and the learning outcomes study of the NCERT (National Achievement Survey, 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

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.. 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 21A. This amendment aimed to provide free and compulsory education to children between the ages of six and fourteen.
 - 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 %.

A few suggestions for reforming 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).
- **Investments in Anganwadi Centres:** Recent researches provide further cause for expanding allocation and expenditure by the Centre and the States.
 - 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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

Conclusion

Investing in ECCE is crucial for India's future, yet it has been overlooked for years. 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.

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