

EMERGING PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN TAMIL NADU

Article

ABSTRACT

Early childhood care and education in Tamil Nadu is based on the basic philosophy that early years of a child's life is a crucial period of physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and growth; that poverty and other disadvantages can impact innumerable and in some respects, irreversible ways on developmental potential; and that well-planned early interventions can have long term positive outcomes for children. ECCE caters to two dimensions namely care and education through different types of government programmes and voluntary initiatives by private schools. Growing global awareness and recognition of the potential and quality perspective of various programmes to improve and change young lives provides the backdrop for this comprehensive survey that identifies six major perspectives such as Social Welfare, Developmental, Socio-Cultural, Economic development, Formal Academic and Human Rights that have emerged in the promotion of ECCE in Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education refers to the formal teaching and care of young children from birth to five years in settings outside of the home by people other than their family aiming at the total development of the child. It is known by different terms such as *Early childhood Education, Pre-school education, Pre-primary education, Montessori education and Kindergarten education*. Care and education are the two major components of the programme. The programmes emphasizing the care dimension are mainly concerned with health and nutrition aspects of children but give less importance to the education dimension whereas the others focus only on the education component promoted by pre-primary or nursery classes attached to English medium schools. Care oriented programmes address children from 0-5 years whereas education oriented programmes address the children of the age group of 2 ½ -5 years through nurseries, kindergartens, preschools, preparatory schools, playschools etc.

The Central and State Governments undertake directly the care oriented free schemes. Non-Governmental Organizations undertake Government or foreign funded programmes and private schools deal with educational programmes with fee. Early childhood is globally acknowledged as a crucial phase of human development with rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and

social developments. Recent societal changes, such as disintegration of the joint family system, industrialization and urbanization followed by women employment, family planning leading to decreased chances of child- child interaction, and globalization with televisions consuming a lot of family interaction time, have adversely affected the quality of family life and the needs of children. These problems have necessitated the emergence of different types developmental care and education oriented early childhood programmes by the Government, NGOs and private schools in Tamilnadu. Growing global awareness and recognition of the potential and quality perspective of various programmes form the backdrop of this comprehensive survey that identifies six major perspectives such as Social Welfare, Developmental, Socio-Cultural, Economic development, Formal Academic and Human Rights that are found to be emerging in the promotion of ECCE in Tamilnadu.

ECCE began with the **Social Welfare Perspective** with the free noon meal schemes introduced

G.Selvaraj

*Research Scholar,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli*

Dr. Maria John

*Professor & Head
Department of History
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli*

and developed by former Chief Ministers Kamaraj and M.G.Ramachandran. In this perspective, children are viewed as a vulnerable group facing problems such as hunger and malnutrition. The response takes the form of nutritious, health development programmes from national and international voluntary organizations with an assumption that investing of today in these programmes can promote growth of physically healthy human persons in future. Provision of supplementary feeding arrests growth retardation and micronutrient related health problems. Although providing food and promoting health had been the main aims of these programmes, the educational component was slowly added. The Integrated Child Developmental Services (ICDS) offer food supplementation with health services like immunization and referral services and non-formal pre-school education for children aged three to six years.

An evaluation of the impact of these programmes seems to reveal better rates of enrolment, and greater retention in later school years by children who have participated in these programmes as compared to those who directly enter first standard. These programmes play an important role in reducing the problem of child labour; they were found to benefit not only the young beneficiaries but also older siblings, particularly girls, who are freed from sibling care responsibility and enabled to join regular schools.

These programmes have a central focus on the outcomes for the whole of the target population of children. For instance the Draft Policy of the Ministry of Women and Child Development of 2012 seeks to universalize the provisions of ECCE for all children in collaboration with different Central and State Governments and other organizations. Increased investment is utilized for preventive measures with multiple intervention strategies. This social welfare perspective has a wider focus than just the ongoing provision of services to individual children.

The Developmental Perspective is based on the view that children move through different stages as they progress from infancy through toddlerhood, pre-school, kindergarten and the early elementary grades. This view rejects the concept of viewing children as miniature adults

as well as the assumption that the earlier a child learns the 3R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) the more successful it will be in school and life. Programmes with this perspective adopt a child-centred curriculum and activities that are motivated by the intrinsic interests and needs of the child. Along with Montessori, psychologists, notably Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, Brunner and Vygotsky, have contributed to the development of this perspective. The major thrusts include informal, holistic, child-centred, play based settings such as those of Montessori education. Tamil Nadu had the direct exposure to Montessori education with Montessori herself conducting training courses to several groups from 1939 to 1949 mainly at Chennai. Her efforts did not bear much impact probably because the people at large were poor and illiterate and they could not afford the cost of even primary education and they did not realize the importance of early childhood education. Montessori movement is very similar to the modern franchising movement that promotes chains of preschools under different brand names for providing early childhood education. Both the movements emphasize the creation of an environment that is appealing to the senses of the children. A lot of learning and play materials are made available and they are kept within the reach of children so that they could easily manipulate them. In a way, what was started by Montessori is being continued by the franchising movement with a commercial outlook based schools reaching out to a large section of upper and middle class children. In fact the drawback with both the movements is that they could not cater to the children belonging to the marginalized sections because of the use of costly materials. In fact this is why Gandhiji asked Montessori to Indianize her method so that children of all sections could benefit. It was only to address this need that Gandhi developed his concept of pre-basic education. The National Draft Policy on ECCE recognizes the importance of the developmentally appropriate perspective and it insists on the promotion of extensive media including folk, print and electronic media to reach out to parents, care givers, professionals and the larger community to create awareness.

The Socio-cultural Perspective arose as a critique of the above mentioned developmental perspective known by the term Developmentally Appropriate Practices. Developmentally appropriate practices echoed traditional child centred values, reinforced by Piagetian theory with emphasis on respect for universal stages of development, young children's desire for play based exploration and activity based learning with the supportive role of the skilled practitioner. For early childhood experts rooted in western cultural traditions and values, these stages express taken-for-granted truths about early development. In reality, these descriptions are full of culture specific assumptions about children's home environment, the availability of books and learning materials and the importance placed on independence.

At the same time they homogenize children, making no allowance for individual differences, nor gender differences, nor for any other aspects of diversity. In consequence, this vision for early childhood development bears little resemblance to the realities of the lives of millions of the world's children, even less to the resources realistically available to foster their development. Therefore the alternative perspective of Contextually and Culturally Appropriate Practice which takes into account all the children's physical and social settings, the culturally regulated customs and child rearing practices, and the beliefs and values of parents and teachers who are responsible for their care and development. Looking at ECCE in Tamilnadu with this perspective, three key socio-cultural areas namely family, media and language can be singled out.

Only the socio-cultural perspective can help us understand and appreciate the system of early childhood education that existed in the joint family system. In the past, people belonging to all age groups were living together in a joint family under one roof. The number of children in a family was not just one or two as found today. There were sufficient opportunities for the child to interact with grandparents, parents and peers.

The children enjoyed the right to be active, to play, to develop fantasies, to create works of art for their own enjoyment, and achieve self determined goals and self evaluated proficiency. The role of the family and its

members in creating a conducive atmosphere for such learning is significant. Informal learning of young children in a natural environment through stories, songs, dance, play, and talk was a regular component of child rearing adults and older children in Tamilnadu. Thus it is the socio-cultural perspective that enables one appreciates the culture of ancient Tamils with regard to early childhood education and care. Even today, family plays a significant role in the formation of young children and therefore enhancing the role of family in the process of educating children would contribute to better outcome of ECCE in Tamil Nadu.

The British rule in India has altered the culture of Tamils and the English language has gained an undue importance not only as a second language but also as the medium of instruction in schools to the extent of rejecting learning through the mother tongue even at kindergarten classes. Language especially the mother tongue is central to the socialization process among all humans. Language plays a key role in determining the identity of a culture.

It is this consciousness that has led to the emergence and development of Dravidian political parties in Tamilnadu and their conquering of power in the state. The young children of Tamilnadu are put in a disadvantageous and weak position with English as the medium of instruction. Learning is obstructed because of the incomprehensible English medium of instruction. This process of learning through a foreign language actually alienates individuals from ones' own culture and so government, educationists and parents should enhance mother tongue based learning.

Children are highly influenced both directly and indirectly by powerful media such as television, films, printed materials, internet etc in direct proportion to both the aspects of the content and the time spent. Viewers are drawn to the advertised products, including unhealthy food items and they tend to eat more fast food and become overweight; they become less socially competent and perform poorly in school compared to non-viewers. Children's television watching takes away their creative and intellectual pursuits. In Tamilnadu media has also contributed to the alienation process by bringing in western culture in terms of dress, food habits, family relationships

etc. It is the responsibility of the educators to evaluate the present trends in the impact of media on the young children and to make informed, intentional and appropriate choices about media for children.

Much of the recent focus on early childhood education relates to considerations related to the **Economic Development Perspective**. The proponents of this theory are of the view that the roots of economic productivity and health risks in adulthood are found in early childhood. Therefore different countries invest in early childhood education. **The human capital model** of early childhood is now strongly expressed within international early childhood policy initiatives. The World Bank suggests that a linear relationship exists between human capital investment and rates of return in early childhood, with benefits well above costs, but also shows rapidly diminishing returns from investment during later childhood. Tamilnadu Government invests on the poor and marginalized children through programmes such as Noon Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Programmes so that in future they will live healthily and contribute their best in return as good citizens.

In Tamilnadu all the Nursery schools, the Matriculation schools and the centres operating through Franchise could be combined under the head of private sector as they charge fees. Their growth was rapid until recently without much regulatory mechanisms from the Government. **The profit perspective** is the underlying current of these private initiatives in spite of the positive contributions they make in the field of ECCE. It is in the context of regulating and controlling the profit motive, the Tamilnadu Government has in the recent past set up a Private Schools Fees Determination Committee.

The compensatory perspective is a view held by mostly working mothers who opt to send their children below three years to day care centres. Some of the day care centres are sponsored by the Government without any charges; some are run by voluntary individuals and organizations mostly with some nominal fees. The charges paid by mothers could be considered as a compensatory amount while taking into consideration the large amount of salary they could earn. Without this service the working mothers will not be able to go for their job with ease and

peace. Or else, in the modern days of living in nuclear families, they are forced to employ someone which would cost them much more. This can be called compensatory perspective.

The undue emphasis on the **Formal Academic Perspective** with the narrow goal of obtaining high marks in written tests is popular in ECCE. This perspective is based on the assumption that the earlier a child learns the 3 R's namely, reading, writing and arithmetic, the more successful the child will be in school and adult life. Making the children memorize a few texts to enable them to reproduce the same in written tests consumes practically all the time that the children spend in schools. The faculties such as creativity, imagination and thinking are not developed.

The major reason for the development of this perspective is because of the symbiotic development of kindergarten programmes with the existing structure of English medium primary and matriculation schools which are already formal and academically oriented. Moreover these programmes are found to act like a downward extension of primary classes with the idea of preparing the children for an entry into the formal primary education. Of course, the origin of this perspective can be traced to the history of British rule in India. The colonization of education in India and the erosion of Tamil culture and language began with the passing of Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education* in 1835, and the promotion of English as the medium of instruction in schools.

The Human Rights Perspective is a recent one and it has originated from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child held in 1989. It is one of the most significant starting points for policy development for the world's young children. It requires that all children be respected as persons in their own right, and states four 'general principles': the right to survival and development; the right to non-discrimination; the right to respect views and feelings; and the 'best interests of the child' as a primary consideration (Articles 6, 2, 12 and 3). It has been ratified by nearly all countries, and national governments had to submit regular reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child about the progress in implementing the

Convention. But implementing a child-rights approach within early childhood policies and practices has only just begun. In this perspective children are no longer envisaged as the recipients of services, beneficiaries of protective measures, nor subjects of social experiments.

Early childhood should not be seen primarily as an investment opportunity, as an opportunity for exploiting human capital to achieve strong economic outcomes for children and for society. This perspective has brought in a major shift in the outlook and views children's entitlement to provision of care and education as their right and not as a needs based approach. Half a century after the founding fathers of the Constitution of India directed the governments to ensure free and compulsory education for every child aged 0-14, the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) was unanimously passed by Parliament in August 2009 and became effective from April 1st 2010. The Government of Tamil Nadu has notified the same and this paves the way for the implementation of the Right to Education Act of 2009 that entitles every child to free and compulsory education until he/she completes the age of 14.

Every child's rights are respected as end in themselves. Genuine child-centred policies recognize each child's entitlement to care, education and comprehensive services; to quality of life during each day of their young lives – in their best interests – as the underpinning principle. This is matched by the identification of the responsibilities of caregivers, communities and the State to enable young children to realise their rights in practice. There are other justifications that build on this foundation. Promoting social equity, respecting cultural diversity and achieving economic benefits are a few of the significant ones. They are also supported by scientific evidences about the formative significance of the early years, the consequences of early adversities and the long-term benefits of quality programmes.

A remarkable feature of basic care and early learning of young children is its amazing worldwide diversity. Every culture invests in children, not as an end state but in recognition that today's adults are a product of their childhoods. Accordingly, with a health development perspective Tamil Nadu has made provisions for children's

basic needs and initial learning from the very earliest age to support their survival and development. It is worthwhile investing in human capital to speed up per capita income. A right based position envisions ECCE as a mandatory project that can empower and guide the poor and underprivileged children to improve their development. But all these attempts by the Government could offer only a partial solution to the integrated development of children. Wholesome development begins only with a renewed socio cultural outlook that enables one to recognize the alienation of the culture of Tamils by the mania for English medium education and the all powerful westernizing media with the support of the culturally rooted Tamil family environment. It is to be acknowledged that the various approaches of ECCE as promoted today in Tamil Nadu are the product of European and North American culture which represent only a minority of the world's early childhoods in a multicultural universe in search of exploration.

REFERENCE

1. DTERT, *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, Rules, Related Orders and Guidelines Chennai, 2012.*
2. *Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Draft National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, New Delhi, 2012.*
3. *Martin Woodhead, Changing Perspectives on Early Childhood: Theory, Research and Policy, UNESCO, 2006.*
4. *Rena Shimoni, A Historical Overview of the Development of Early Childhood Services, ERIC, 1990.*
5. *Young-Ihm Kwon, Changing Curriculum for Early Childhood Education in England, Early Childhood Research And Practice, 2002.*
6. *World Bank Report on Training for Early Childhood Care and Education in Kenya, World Bank, Nairobi, 1995.*