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## **Early Childhood Education And The Concept National Education Policy (2020)**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* emphasizes *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)* as a crucial foundation for lifelong learning. It underscores the need for universal access to quality ECCE, integrating play-based learning and holistic development. The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* emphasizes *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)* as a crucial foundation for lifelong learning. It underscores the need for universal access to quality ECCE, integrating play-based learning and holistic development.

**Keywords:-** Development, Subsumes, Children, Skill, Independent

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### **INTRODUCTION :**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION** India has a population of over one billion, of which there are 160 million children between the ages of 0-6 years (GOI, 2011), constituting the critical mass in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) category. This is the largest population of young children, globally. We are the world's largest democracy and according to the 2011 Census, we have over 70 million children in the age bracket of 3 to 6 years. The numbers stand testimony to the magnitude of the challenge that India as a nation faces, in providing quality education to its youngest population, owing to its size and diversity. Early childhood refers to the age group of 0 to 6 years and early childhood education subsumes the age bracket of 3 to 6 years of age, which is also the focus of this study. That early childhood education is an immensely significant component of human development, is acknowledged all over the world. Researches in several fields such as neuroscience, psychology and child development have highlighted the importance of the period of early childhood in the lifelong development of an individual. It has been established that the human brain reaches around eighty five percent of its total adult size by the age of thirty months and ninety percent of its growth by the age of thirty six months (Purves, 1994). Further, the pace of development of the brain is most rapid in the earliest years of life. Ninety per cent of the development and growth of the brain occurs by the age of 6 years (Karoly et al., 1998). Blair (2002) called it a period of plasticity owing to the influence it has on the personality of an individual through his/her life. Research from several different fields has provided evidence of the criticality of early childhood in the development of the brain and its skills. Doherty (1997) identified certain crucial periods, within the first six years of life, in which brains are wired to respond to appropriate stimulus and if this stimulation is 1 2 provided, it aids the development of advanced neural structures. Early experiences therefore have been proven to have a far-reaching impact on brain development as well as behavior. Young (2007) propounded that diverse experiences impact the brain's wiring and architecture and the physiology of the human body. All these contribute towards the attainment of emotional, cognitive and social outcomes. In light of the above, it cannot be disputed that the experiences that a young child has in the early years, form the basis of his/her physical, mental and cognitive growth and wellbeing in the future. In fact, the achievement of developmental goals and milestones such as language competency, motor skills, emotional regulation (Sander, 1987), are all related to the development of the brain but require nurturing and support from the environment as well. The need for a strong early childhood care and education programme is thus imminent. Many programmes across the world have demonstrated this to be true. Young (2002), identified the benefits of early support and care to include enhanced well-being of children and better learning levels as a foundation for lifelong learning as well as aspects that are social and economic, which would reduce poverty, and increase social mobility. Research studies substantiate the importance of "stable, responsive, nurturing relationships and rich learning experiences in the earliest years that provide lifelong benefits for learning, behavior and both physical and mental health" (Shonkoff, 2009, p. 1). Barnett (2008) in her research found that early childhood education and care was critical to the healthy development and well-being of socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Early childhood is "...a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in [our] culture... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth" (Donaldson, Grieve, and Pratt, 1983, p. 1). Given that the age group covered by Early Childhood Care and Education is 0-6 years, it is important to point out that while 0-3 years is a crucial stage in a child's life, the age span of 3-6 years, is also equally important. This is particularly true in the context of how early childhood education or early years education for 3-6-year olds is 1 3 designed and transacted in schools. Popularly referred to as preschool or preprimary classes, this includes nursery and kindergarten classes, which are also the focus of this study. Research studies such as the Perry Preschool Project have ratified that attending a good quality preschool programme, paves the way for increased employment and reduced pregnancy and delinquency rates in adolescence (Berrueta-Clement, 1984). Likewise, the Carolina Abecedarian Project confirmed that negative impacts of poverty on children's mental development can be reduced

by enrichment in the preschool years (Berk, 2006). The scenario in India also mirrors similar patterns. In a seminal study conducted on 38,000 children across 8 Indian states, Kaul et al (1993), demonstrated how participation in preschool programmes made a positive difference of about 8 to 20 per cent on retention or continuation rates of children in primary grades. The ASER or Annual Status of Education Report (2013, p. 8) states, “in order to improve learning outcomes and sustain them in the long run, the early years may be the best place to invest”. The Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (Kaul et al., 2014), in its vision of Early Childhood Education, drew attention to the fact that positive benefits were directly related to the quality of the programmes in place. Interestingly, India turned its attention with full seriousness to ECCE as late as 2012, although the concept dates back to the National Policy on Education (1986). The first ECCE policy, was notified in 2012. Alongside, a National ECCE Curriculum and a Quality Standards Framework were also designed and implemented. The National ECCE Council was notified in 2014. Another landmark was that India became a signatory to the Sustainable Developmental Goals in 2015 that emphasize quality preprimary education to all sectors of society. An interesting related development was that India passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009, aimed at universalization of elementary education, quality and inclusion, but unfortunately focused on children in the age group of 6 to 14 years, leaving out those in the age group of 0 to 6 years, subtly conveying that early childhood education was not of prime concern. However, in the absence of adequate early childhood education provisions, expanding and strengthening primary education would only enhance learning gaps because children would reach primary school without adequate stimulation and experiences. Keeping this in mind, the Draft National Educational Policy (2019) extended the RTE to the early years and made the state responsible for provision of quality early childhood education services. In fact, early childhood has received major focus and attention in the National Education Policy, 2020 and the impetus to early childhood education has been one of its most potent recommendations. A case for supporting early childhood education can be made with reference to the findings of the ASER reports (2016, 2017, 2018) which despite highlighting higher enrolment and retention in primary classes, have pointed out low levels of student achievement. Across states, close to fifty percent of the students in class five have reading dexterity levels which correspond with class two. The World Bank (2018) calls this a crisis of „schooling without learning“. The missing link appears to be a poor foundation on account of none or very little stimulation during the early years. The strengthening of the foundation can be achieved through quality universal preschool education. Many studies cited earlier and in the s that follow, have argued that good quality early childhood education is an essential pre- requisite to ensure success in higher education as well as a reduction in drop-out rates. The results of India Early Childhood Education Impact study (Kaul et al, 2017) demonstrate a positive correlation between a preschool education that has a developmentally appropriate curriculum and children’s readiness levels, when they enter school. Another significant finding from the study highlights a wide gap between theory of developmentally appropriate practice and actual field practice. Nonetheless, the study makes it clear that the abovementioned benefits from early childhood education are highly dependent on the programme’s quality.

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### **The Draft National Education Policy, 2019 and National Education Policy, 2020**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the Education for All (EFA) movement are all evidence that there is a global commitment to early childhood care and education. The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (1990), adopted the World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. The World Education Forum (2000) adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All. All these had components that addressed the significance of early childhood education programmes. India became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 and pledged a commitment to Education for All, across the nation. In fact, as early as in 1951, ECCE in its composite form of nutrition, health and education, could be seen as an integral part of all the initiatives of the Government and other Non- Governmental bodies. ECCE has also found mention in all major policy documents including the National Policy for Children (1974); Integrated Child Development Services (1975); the National Policy on Education (1986); Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001); National Plan of Action (NPA, 2005) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), to name a few significant ones. Infact, it was in the 1986 policy that ECCE was mentioned explicitly as a separate section and a commitment was made to a child- centred approach in education and joyful learning. Formally, as was mentioned earlier, India's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy was drafted in 2012 and has been implemented since 2013. The national ECCE council was notified in 2014 and guidelines for curriculum and quality standards were drafted. The policy framework seeks to “promote inclusive, equitable and contextualized opportunities for promoting optimal development and active learning capacity of all children below 6 years of age...by facilitating an enabling environment through appropriate systems, processes and provisions across the country.” The National Plan of Action for Children (MWCD, 2016) with its emphasis on child rights in the domains of survival, health, nutrition, education and protection, further strengthened the cause of ECCE.

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### **The Draft National Education Policy, 2019 and National Education Policy, 2020**

During the course of this research study, India notified a draft National Education Policy in 2019 and passed the new policy in 2020. This new policy validated the very basis of this research study. It emphasises the criticality of high quality early childhood education and its repercussions for the development of human capital in India. It draws on the Sustainable Development Goals and highlights goal 4 which emphasises quality education. The first major change proposed in the draft policy is related to early childhood. It purports that early childhood education should be viewed as the foundational stage of school education and should comprise of three years of pre-primary education along with grades 1 and 2. This is a major shift in policy, since before this, early childhood or 0-6 years was considered to have a welfare focus, to be looked after by the Ministry of Women and Child development and was even kept out of the ambit of the Right to Education. The new Policy extends the Right to Education act to early childhood education and hands over the responsibility of its management to the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It takes into account that children from the ages of 3- 8 years need to have similar curriculum and play based pedagogy that allows for exploration and discovery. The Policy takes into cognizance the differences in the cognitive growth and development trajectories in children and promotes flexibility in education between the ages of 3- 8 years. Another major change that the Policy has proposed is the structure of school education. While earlier it was primary education, followed by three years of middle school and then secondary and finally senior secondary, also referred to as 10+2, the Policy proposes an entirely new structure. The New Structure Proposed by the National Education Policy, 2020.

Class 1 and 2 have been included in early childhood education, which is now five years. It has been termed the Foundation stage. Classes 3, 4 and 5 have been clubbed and termed the Preparatory stage which involves more aspects of formal learning. This is followed by the next three years called Middle School which

Both these tenets have brought early childhood education into focus and highlighted that early years have their own importance and are not simply a preparation for formal school. The Policy now extends early childhood education to grade 2. Therefore, teaching-learning practices, processes and curricula would need to be revisited to understand the difference between the foundation stage and the preparatory stage. This distinction is critical for identifying and promoting quality in the early years classroom. The new National Education Policy, (2020, p.7) mandates the “universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education” to ensure that every child has the required readiness for school and for class 1, no later than 2030. The draft National Education Policy, 2019 elaborates that the learning process for a child commences immediately at birth. Brain research ratifies that over eighty five percent of a child’s brain development is complete by the time a child is six years of age, indicating the critical importance of the early years and the need for appropriate care and stimulation for a healthy and happy child. “Excellent care, nurture, nutrition, physical activity, psychosocial environment, and cognitive and emotional stimulation during a child’s first six years are thus considered extremely critical for ensuring proper brain development and, consequently, desired learning curves over a person’s lifetime.” (draft NEP, 2019, p 45) Many studies, elaborated earlier in this chapter, have corroborated that high quality early childhood education programmes positively impact formal school education outcomes and the ability/tendency for lifelong learning. The Policy also focuses on the importance of young children attaining foundational literacy and numeracy, through multilingual, experiential, play based activities. Other policy recommendations, related to early childhood education include- would develop abstract thinking. Finally the last four years of school have been termed Secondary education. This is the new 5+3+3+4 structure of school education. Co-locating anganwadis with existing primary schools, and the co-location of preschools with primary schools, wherever possible.

Building high quality, stand -alone preschools.

Providing physical infrastructure of high quality that is conducive to and scaffolds learning, in all aanganwadis, pre-schools, and primary schools.

Developing a specific curricular and pedagogical framework for 3-8 year olds, by NCERT, to ensure developmentally appropriate practice.

Building a professionally qualified set of educators for early childhood education

Introducing a quality regulation/accreditation system for early childhood education programmes.

All the above policy recommendations highlight that the focus is on enhancing the quality of services for our youngest learners, over and above issues of access, enrolment and retention.

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## Understanding what is meant by Quality in the Policy

Unfortunately, while providing some essential cognitive stimulation, opportunities for play, and day care services, most anganwadis still remain focused on the welfare and care aspects of ECCE. Simultaneously, most private and other format preschools continue to prepare children for class 1, by including all that they believe is needed in class 1, in their early childhood education programmes. The new National Education Policy 2020, envisions an education system which is India centered, providing high quality education to all. It is, therefore, imperative that we decode the term „high quality“. The Policy, along with India’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030, demonstrate that the global education development agenda is focusing on quality education in the early years. This research study aims at understanding the nuances of quality in an early childhood education classroom, through the lens of the teacher who is a crucial stakeholder in the process

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## Genesis and Central Focus of the Present Study

Some of these were high fee charging and some were free of cost, for low income groups. Some were located in rural India, across the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, UP, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Assam, some in low income urban settlements of Mumbai and Delhi like Dharavi, Nalasopara, Mongolpuri and Sultanpuri. I also engaged with urban programmes and schools which had plentiful funds and were committed to providing the best learning experiences and resources to their children. Through these multiple programmes and their differing formats, there was one common feature that I observed there was a continual quest for quality education, and especially for the youngest learners in the age group of 3 to 6 years. No institution had a clear articulation of what the notion of quality meant, particularly in early childhood education and how it could be articulated and practiced by all. Was quality related to good practices drawn from some leading schools, or to learning outcomes, or was it related to school infrastructure and curriculum design, or was it an indicator which could predict future learning and achievement of children? These were some issues which came to my mind and I attempted to examine. Further, whether the notion of quality was related to social class and the socio cultural context of a school or it had to be expansively conceptualized to encompass the diversity that existed, were some additional questions that I grappled with. It was to find answers to these questions that I enrolled for the PhD programme in the Department of Education and made „Notions of quality in early childhood education“ the area of my research. To be more specific, the central focus of the present research is to build an understanding of what quality means in early childhood education or ECE, from the lens of practitioners in the field. While fully recognizing that policy documents present a systemic view and vision of the same, the present research has been envisioned somewhat differently. It attempts to use a bottom up approach to document and understand the processes and parameters of quality in early childhood education, as understood by teachers. To provide an additional perspective, the notions of experts such as policy makers, school heads, civil society members, have also been explored. An analysis of curricula from programmes around the world and Chapter 1 11 of the schools in this study, provides an understanding of policy directives. Very clearly then the emphasis is on a practitioners’ perspective rather than arriving at universal benchmarks or a checklist for quality measures.

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## Making the Case for Quality in Early Childhood Education

The early childhood stage of learning is significant because it forms the foundation of life-long learning and development. Early childhood education is the first chance a child gets to develop skills and attitudes as well as experience socialization outside of the home. International studies have repeatedly evidenced, that participating in high quality early childhood programmes has a positive impact on children's development and learning (OECD, 2001 and 2006; Sylva et al., 2004; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). Around the world, countries that are a part of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) consortium, impose monitoring mechanisms for safety and health checks, on centers authorized to look after young children. India is also an OECD country. Appropriate monitoring and regulatory mechanisms, serve the dual purpose of defining and enforcing programme standards as well as providing some amount of equity for families in poorer neighborhoods (OECD, 2001 and 2006). Nonetheless, as the Starting Strong (OECD, 2006) report points out, the type of regulation/regulatory mechanism is vastly different amongst its member nations. On the other hand, research also indicates that participation in low-quality provisions leads to several language, social and development challenges in children (OECD, 2001 and 2006). Conversely, children participating in programmes with high quality, demonstrate a better performance in numeracy and literacy. This positive impact is greatest for children from marginalized families where the education of parents and other family members is little (OECD, 2006). Many research studies have concluded that learning in one stage of life, lays the foundation for learning, in the next stage of life: so investing in the fundamental stage of early childhood, enhances the productivity and outcomes of the succeeding stage and so on (Cunha et al., 2010). The findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al, 2002), that aimed at understanding the development of 3 to 7 year olds, in a longitudinal study, validated that high quality pre-schooling experiences related to better intellectual and social development of children and significantly enhanced all round development. Quality indicators included a host of circumstances such as warm interactions, trained teachers and equal importance given to intellectual and social development. The findings also identified dimensions like the quality of interactions and conversations between the teacher and child, the types of activities, teachers' skills and their understanding of the curriculum and parent engagement to be important factors that contribute to children's development and learning

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