



Early Childhood Care and Education in India in the Lens of NEP 2020: Foundation of Lifelong Learning

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Abstract:

Early childhood, from birth to 6 years, is regarded as a critical phase for a child's cognitive, physical, motor, social, and emotional development, and the child's brain undergoes rapid development, indicating significant capacity for change. Currently, 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) has emerged as a critical equity issue in the Indian context. ECCE implies a comprehensive, integrative program that includes nutrition, health, and infant and early childhood education, playing a crucial role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning while promoting overall development and well-being. SDG 4.2 aims to 'ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education, thereby preparing them for primary education'. This goal is the highest priority and highlights the significance of this critical early phase for a child's holistic well-being and future academic success. In this context, NEP 2020 regards ECCE as the foundation of a child's holistic development. This study seeks to examine the proposals for new policy and the post-NEP 2020 policy review, and to navigate potential future paths for restructuring the ECCE with respect to the foundation of lifelong learning.



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Introduction

Ensuring that children receive the optimal start in life is an increasing priority among countries. Children reflect the future of every country. Every child should have the possibility for holistic growth and development to achieve their maximum potential (NCERT, 2019, Mondal & Mondal, 2025). The infancy period, spanning from birth to 6 years, is recognised as a vital phase encompassing the child's 'physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and motor development' (Kaul & Sankar, 2009; Kaul, 2019; Kumar, 2023). In this lens, given that children's brains undergo significant development between the ages of 1 and 8, this period is considered a critical window for education (Doherty, 1997; UNESCO, 2022). High-quality early childhood experiences are crucial to children's growth and development. Research indicates that high-quality pre-school experiences positively influence children's school adaptations and academic performance in subsequent education (NCERT, 2019). Again, multidisciplinary studies in neuroscience, economics, and child development have shown that the early stages of life are critical, as a child's brain growth accelerates by age five (Haartsen, Jones & Johnson, 2016; Barnett, 1995; NCERT, 2019, p. 1). In this case, environmental circumstances in early childhood significantly influence the development of children's brain neural networks. Delivering appropriate stimulation at the proper time is essential for brain cell networking, which influences individuals' behaviour, thinking, and learning throughout their lives (NCERT, 2019, p. 1). Early childhood is considered the most crucial developmental stage in an individual's life, and 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) plays a crucial role in laying the groundwork for academic achievement, lifelong learning, future health, socio-emotional growth, and financial prosperity (UNESCO, 2019, p. 7). The early years of childhood are considered essential for instilling fundamental values and social skills in children (Kaul & Sankar 2009). It is confided that these values are internalized as culture from the family. Compared with other educational tiers, it has demonstrated the largest societal returns, evidenced by a benefit-to-cost ratio of 7:1 (UNICEF, 2017; UNESCO, 2019, p. 7). The early experiences and environments of children significantly impact their future well-being, and adequately funding high-quality ECCE programs represents one of the most effective investments a nation can undertake to combat inequality, interrupt the intergenerational cycle of poverty, and enhance various individual and societal outcomes in later life. Carneiro and Heckman argued that investment in early infant development for underprivileged children yields an annual societal gain of 7 to 10 percent through enhanced personal success and production (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). This early childhood phase is crucial for establishing enduring societal and individual habits and values (Kaul & Sankar, 2009, 2009, p.1; NCERT, 2019). Shashtri & Sarojkumari (2022) define pre-school, or ECCE, as an assortment of programs aimed at fostering children's comprehensive development before their admission to primary school (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Investing in early infant care is essential by providing an emotionally nurturing and engaging playful atmosphere for each child, which is both their right and a means to establish a strong base for their future (NCERT, 2019). Moreover, numerous studies indicate that longer-term benefits and higher returns are achieved by spending during a child's first six years of life rather than investing at any subsequent period (Currie & Thomas, 1995; CECED, 2017; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). UNESCO (2022) highlights the inclusive ECCE as a pivotal investment in promoting 'social cohesion, gender equality, holistic development, and lifelong learning'. ECCE is seen as "a significant input to compensate

for early environmental deprivations at home by providing a stimulating environment to children” (Mohite & Bhatt, 2008). ‘To improve pupils’ learning outcomes in elementary education, every child must receive high-quality preschool experiences. Ensuring high-quality preschool education is a primary goal outlined by the 2030 ‘Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (NCERT, 2019).

The initial formal record of preschool Education as an organised undertaking in India originates from the latter part of the 19th century, when ‘Gijubhai Badheka’ and ‘Tarabai Modak’, among others, emerged as founders of this movement in India (Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p.3; NCERT, 2022, p.15). Inspired by ‘Madame Montessori’s travel to India, they founded pre-school education centres in Gujarat. Prior to India’s independence in 1947, the demand for ECCE was predominantly met by voluntary organisations and private institutions, especially through preschool education (Kaul & Sankar 2009, p. 3). Subsequently, recognising the crucial implications of ECCE, following the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, the Government of India (GoI) has transitioned from a welfare model reliant on private voluntary initiatives with government assistance to a developmental and rights-based framework (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). During the initial decades of independent India, ECCE was mainly entrusted to a limited number of voluntary and private groups (ibid), and this scenario persisted until the 3rd 5-year plan (1961-1966) (Mohite & Bhatt, 2008; Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p. 16).

On the other hand, the Kothari Commission (1964) advocated for the creation of pre-school institutions nationwide. The ‘National Policy on Education’ (NPE) and the establishment of the ‘National Children’s Board’ emphasise preschool education as a critical objective that influences subsequent success in education (NCERT, 2016, p.16). The 5th 5-year plan (1974-1979) showed a clear shift in focus from welfare for children to development (Kaul & Sankar 2009, p. 17). This transition culminated in the proclamation of the ‘National Policy for Children’ (1974), marking a conceptual shift towards ‘Integrated Child Development Services’ (ICDS) for children (Mohite & Bhatt, 2008; Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p. 17). In accordance to this Policy, the Indian government has designated the universal of ICDS as its principal strategy to fulfill the initial objective of ECCE under ‘Education for All’, aimed at enhancing ‘health, nutrition and preschool education services to children from pre-natal stage to age of six years and to pregnant and lactating mothers especially targeted for the poor and the deprived’ on a trial basis (NCERT, 2006; Mohite & Bhatt, 2008; Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p.19). Subsequent 5-year plans have consistently emphasised the importance of developing early childhood services as a strategic ‘investment in human resource development’ (Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p.17). The NPE (1986) regards ECCE as “an integral input the Human Resource Strategy, feeder and support program for primary education” (Gol, 1986; Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p.16; NCERT, 2022, p.16; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Following the implementation of the national policy in 1986, notable global changes also emerged, which accelerated the adoption of a rights-based approach to child development. The 1990s heralded a significant global advancement in ECCE with the establishment of the ‘United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (CRC) in 1989, the ‘World Declaration on Education for All’ (EFA) in March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, the ‘Dakar Framework for Action’ on EFA, and the ‘Millennium Development Goals’ (MDGs) in 2000 (Mohite & Bhatt 2008; UNESCO, 2015, p. 10). These documents unequivocally identified ECCE as the primary goal for achieving EFA, asserting that ‘learning begins at birth’ (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Also, the

primary goal of these conventions was to establish the recognition of ECCE as an essential part of basic schooling and to enhance and extend comprehensive ECCE, particularly for the most 'vulnerable and disadvantaged children' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10).

In alignment with worldwide pledges, the GoI initiated the 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan'- a centrally financed program in collaboration with States in 2001-2002 to achieve 'Universal Elementary Education' (UEE). Article 21A of the Indian Constitution has been incorporated as a 'fundamental right' later than Article 21, stipulating that "The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children aged six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine" (Kaul & Sankar, 2009, p. 15). The revised Article 45 ('Directive Principles of State Policy') of India's Constitution now stipulates that 'The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years'. Consequently, early childhood education programs were regarded as an integral component of the constitutional obligation. In 2001, the 86th Amendment of the Constitution established 'elementary education as a Fundamental Right for children' aged 6-14, thereby dissociating ECCE from this obligation. This provoked significant dissent from numerous professional organisations and the public society. As a result, ECCE has been incorporated as a constitutional provision; however, it is not a judicial right for each child, as stated in Article 45: "The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years" (GoI, 1949). The 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' was reformed into the 'Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan', an 'Integrated Education Mission' including pre-primary and higher secondary education, effective from 2018 to 2019 (GoI, 2018). In 2013, the GoI implemented the National ECCE Policy, which articulates the vision for children below 6 years old and aligns with 'The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2009' (RTE Act-2009), effective from April 2010, as well as Goal 4.2 of the SDGs 2030 endorsed by the Government (Panchal & Mohan, 2023). In this context, the NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of early learning for all children aged 3 to 6 by 2030 (GoI, 2020). The after-policy execution phase is currently in full operation. Therefore, it is essential to reevaluate the proposals of the latest policy and the GoI's role in the post-policy execution phase to navigate potential future paths for restructuring the ECCE with respect to the foundation of lifelong learning.

Method and Sources of Materials

The study has primarily adopted the 'Policy Document Analysis' (PDA) method, and its approach is qualitative. PDA is basically 'a method for investigating the nature of a policy document in order to look at both what lies behind it and within it' (Cardno, 2018, p. 625). Here, pertinent policy proposals, i.e., the 'Union Ministries of Education and Women & Child Development', along with those from the 'National Council of Educational Research and Training' (NCERT) and the 'National Council for Teacher Education' of the GoI, have been examined in relation to the ECCE framework, particularly in the lens of within and after NEP 2020, to fulfill the research objectives. The current investigation has examined the following research purposes:

- 1) To examine the proposals of the new policy and review the post-NEP 2020 policy.
- 2) To navigate potential future paths for restructuring the ECCE with respect to the foundation of lifelong learning.

ECCE in the lens of NEP 2020: Policy propositions

The GoI made significant progress with the launch of its current NEP in 2020, more than 30 years after the previous substantial modification of the 'National Policy on Education' in 1986, amended in 1992. The implementation of prior educational policies has primarily emphasized accessibility and equity. However, one of the core proposals of the new policy is to regard ECCE as the cornerstone of a child's whole development. The latest policy notes that the existing 10+2 educational framework does not include children aged 3-6, as class 1 begins at age 6 (GoI, 2020, p. 7). The latest 5+3+3+4 framework incorporates a robust foundation starting at age 3, aiming to enhance holistic education, overall development, and well-being (ibid). This policy currently emphasises the prevailing challenges facing ECCE in India; quality ECCE remains unavailable, especially for children from 'socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds'. Robust investment in ECCE can ensure all children have access, allowing them to engage and thrive within the education system throughout their lives. The NEP 2020 commits to prioritising the universal provision of 'high-quality early childhood development, care, and education' by 2030, ensuring that all pupils entering Grade-1 are ready for school (GoI, 2020, p. 7). However, the entire range of NEP 2020's proposals can be divided into the following three broad domains: – 'curricula and pedagogy, universal provisioning of access to ECCE, and universal provisioning of ensuring equitable quality ECCE'. Let us focus on these policy areas–

Curricula and pedagogy:

The latest policy offered a curriculum and pedagogical structure for school education that is pertinent to address the developmental requirements and interests of pupils at various phases of their development. The suggested new educational framework for school education is structured as a 5+3+3+4 design, according to the age groups of '3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18' years, respectively (GoI, 2020). The new structure also incorporates a robust ECCE foundation from the age of 3, which not only enhances overall learning, holistic development, and the child's happiness but also fosters character development and the formation of well-balanced people with 21st-century skills. The ECCE curriculum will be refined to emphasise basic elements, fostering holistic, adaptable, multifaceted, and inquiry-driven learning i.e., 'alphabets, languages, numbers, counting, colours, shapes, indoor and outdoor play, puzzles and logical thinking, problem-solving, visual art, craft, drama, puppetry, music and movement' (GoI, 2020, p.7). Through this, the child's 'physical and motor development, cognitive development, social-emotional-moral development, cultural/artistic development, communication and early language development, and literacy and numeracy' will grow (ibid). To this end, the new policy stated that:

A National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) for children up to the age of 8 will be developed by NCERT in two parts, namely, a sub-framework for 0-3 year-olds, and a sub-framework for 3-8 year-olds, aligned with the practices based on India's rich early childhood education tradition including art, stories, poetry, songs, and games, the newest research on ECCE, and national and international best practices. The framework will serve as a guide both for parents and for early childhood care and education institutions (GoI, 2020, p. 7).

Besides, the new policy suggests that ECCE is ‘flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning’ and also involves a focus on developing ‘social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation’ (GoI, 2020, p.7). All levels, including the foundational phase covering the ECCE curriculum and pedagogy, will implement ways of learning through experience, such as practical exercises, arts and sports-integrated education, and storytelling-driven pedagogy (GoI, 2020, p. 12). This policy promotes the use of ‘home language, mother tongue, or local language’ for instruction until 5th grade and ideally until 8th grade and beyond (GoI, 2020, p. 13; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Also, the new policy observes that:

The responsibility for ECCE curriculum and pedagogy will lie with MHRD to ensure its continuity from pre-primary school through primary school. The planning and implementation of early childhood care and education curriculum will be carried out jointly by the Ministries of HRD, Women and Child Development (WCD), Health and Family Welfare (HFW), and Tribal Affairs. A special joint task force will be constituted for continuous guidance of the smooth integration of early childhood care and education into school education.

Universal access to ECCE: The main goal would be to ensure equitable access to top-notch ECCE nationwide in a staged approach, prioritizing shires and areas that are especially socio-economically disadvantaged (SED). The ECCE will be implemented through a significantly enhanced system of preschool educational institutes, which includes (a) independent Anganwadis (AWs); (b) AWs situated alongside primary institutes; (c) pre-primary institutes catering to children aged 5-6 years, located within existing primary institutes; and (d) independent preschools - will be further developed by recruiting personnel and educators specifically trained in ECCE curriculum and pedagogy (GoI, 2020, p.7).

The new policy reports that the absence of universal access to ECCE results in many children lagging behind in the first few weeks of first grade. To assure school readiness, NCERT and SCERTs will cooperate with parents and peers to create a 3-month playful ‘school preparation module’ for first-grade learners, emphasising alphabets, phonetics, vocabulary, colours, shapes, and numerals (GoI, 2020, p.7) which will help to develop children’s ‘physical, motor, cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, cultural, artistic, communication, early language, literacy, and numeracy development’. The NEP 2020 states that all children will shift to a ‘Preparatory Class’ or ‘Balavatika’ before reaching 5 years, which has an ECCE-trained educator and playful learning activities. The ‘midday meal program, health check-ups, and growth monitoring’ services provided by the AW system shall be extended to readiness class pupils in both AW and the primary institute (GoI, 2020, p.7).

Universal provision to ensure equitable quality ECCE: To ensure equitable accessibility to ECCE, AW centers will be enhanced with superior facilities, play devices, and proficient AW staff/educators, featuring well-ventilated, child-friendly facilities that provide an enriched learning atmosphere. Additionally, ensuring a smooth shift from Anganwadi Centers to primary schools, children will visit local schools and be fully incorporated into school complexes, enabling AW children, guardians, and teachers to engage in school programs (GoI, 2020, p. 7).

NEP 2020 states that AW employees/teachers must hold professional credentials of 10+2 or above, accompanied by a six-month certificate program in ECCE, or below 10+2 with a 1-year diploma program. The 'Early Childhood Care and Education' training for AW employees/educators would be supervised by the 'Cluster Resource Centres of the School Education Department', which will conduct a minimum of 30 days of contact class for ongoing evaluation. In this context, the State Govt. has tasked the development of competently trained teachers for ECCE through phase-certain professional instruction, mentorship practices, and career mapping (GoI, 2020, p. 8). Essential provisions will be established for the early professional training of these teachers and their 'Continuous Professional Development'. All overarching proposals are currently in the execution phase across India. Furthermore, the post-NEP progress should be judiciously reviewed in the context of ECCE.

Reviewing ECCE: Post NEP 2020 Policy

After the implementation of the NEP 2020, the central government has initiated a series of measures consistent with the policy directives on ECCE. Like the 'National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage' (NCFFS) in 2022, formulated by NCERT, provides India's inaugural 'integrated curriculum framework for children' aged 3-8. It is predicated on the suggested revised school curriculum framework laid out in the NEP 2020, which aims to foster the all-round development of children through play, action, and inquiry-driven education (NCERT, n.d.). Additionally, NCERT is producing a preparedness package for the preparatory class prior to class 1, emphasising play-driven learning aimed at enhancing 'cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, early reading and numeracy'. The new policy notes that the lack of universal access to ECCE results in a significant number of children lagging behind in the initial weeks of first Grade. Based on a new policy report, the MoE is establishing a crucial foundation for early learners to facilitate future education through the implementation of a 'National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy', which aims to ensure that all pupils achieve these competencies by Grade 3 in primary school. The MoE initiated 'National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy' (NIPUN Bharat) through Samagra Shiksha in July 2021, with the aim of assuring that every child achieves 'foundational literacy and numeracy' by Grade 3 (GoI, 2021). To attain the NIPUN Bharat objective by 2026-27, the essential involvement of all provinces and Union Territories (UTs) is imperative, especially in developing state-appropriate, stage-specific plans, ensuring teacher affordability and capacity formation, and selecting a pool of instructors to provide educational support to teachers (Modal & Mondal, 2025). Consequently, Samagra Shiksha is an integrated initiative that spans all educational levels from pre-primary to post-secondary, aiming to provide universal access to quality education for all children. It has been reformed to prioritise basic literacy and numeracy (GoI, 2021). Again, NISHTHA is an integrated teacher preparation program introduced at various stages of school education to enhance quality and build teachers' capacity for basic reading and numeracy (GoI, 2021). The new policy notes that the maximum number of students is already lagging in Grade 1 due to insufficient universal access to ECCE. In accordance with the recommendations of NEP 2020, the NCERT produced the 3-month playful 'School Preparation Module –Vidya Pravesh' in July 2021, which can be customised or accepted by Provinces and UTs according to their requirements (GoI, 2021).

Another subsequent development following the NEP has been noted: to enhance the comprehensive ECCE framework in Anganwadis, the 'Ministry of Women and Child Development' (MWCD) of the GoI constituted a National ECCE Taskforce in March 2022. This taskforce is tasked with delivering action-oriented proposals aimed at boosting the capacity and perception of the Anganwadi system as an educational framework and the Anganwadi centre as a learning hub (GoI, 2022, p. 1). Following the introduction of the NCFES in 2022 by NCERT, the Union MWCD has recently unveiled a 'National Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education' in 2024, titled 'Aadharshila', specifically designed for children 3-6 years old (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). This curriculum incorporates all facets of development, including 'physical/motor, cognitive, language and literacy, socio-emotional, cultural/aesthetic' and good habits, in accordance with the new policy and the NCFES 2022 (ibid; GoI, 2020). To facilitate the seamless implementation of this curriculum, the MoE has launched Navchetana – the 'National Framework of Early Childhood Stimulation' in 2024, aimed at acquainting parents, Anganwadis, Anganwadi employees, and ASHA staff in India about overall development in early childhood language, literacy, numeracy, sensory skills, and an activity-oriented curriculum (GoI, 2024a). This Navchetana will encourage Anganwadi Staff and Caretakers to deliver overall early stimulation about receptive caregiving and developmentally appropriate early education (GoI, 2024b; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Now, let us see how to navigate the future path to ECCE.

Potential Pathways

ECCE's endeavors primarily focus on curriculum development and teacher training about contemporary curricula, while remaining relatively silent on enhancing fair access to quality ECCE schools, teacher recruiting efforts, and teacher remuneration. The provision of state funds for enhancing the ECCE landscape has not yet been resolved. The initial stage of post-policy developments presents an opportunity to tackle daunting challenges through potential pathways. Given the nature of challenges, the subsequent future paths should be contemplated in the post-policy operational stage-

First, the MWCD may assume responsibility for children's 'health and nutrition' from ages 3 to 6. The MoE assumes complete responsibility for preschool education (ages 3 to 6), offering clarity of roles and an adequate distribution of resources. Hence, a coordinated realignment of tasks between the MoE and the MWCD is necessary. The two sectors of the central government must synchronise their ECCE priorities, plans, and practices with the objectives of the NEP 2020 for successful execution across India. This synchronization must also be sustained at the state level. This strategic restructuring would not only define ministerial responsibilities but also facilitate the effective allocation of resources and funds.

Second, States ought to allocate resources for a comprehensive, one-time assessment and development of all essential elements needed in an ECCE classroom. This can be evaluated from the perspectives of pedagogy, usability, and educational resources. States may take in this effort to establish a continuum and coherence with the FLN curriculum.

Third, the study of the union budget indicates that the allocated funds per classroom and the total number of classes are inadequate to provide quality ECCE on a broad scale. In the financial year 2023-24, the budget allocation for ECCE is Rs. 1,117 crore. A slight rise in this can enable states to offer an extra classroom. Similarly, State governments ought to devote resources to

establish preschool sections in high-enrollment government schools and, if required, enhance nearby Anganwadis. States should emphasise the proportion of educators in ECCE classrooms, especially in instances where a qualified instructor is absent, or assign an additional educator, especially for 5-6-year-olds, in nearby Anganwadis.

Fourth, in addition to a rigorous monitoring, regulation, and review system for ECCE, an augmented budgetary allocation is needed (UNESCO, 2006) to support the phased planning of ECCE to achieve goals by 2030. Hence, to achieve universal ECCE by 2030, India must increase its expenditure from an average of Rs 8,297 to Rs 32,500 and Rs 46,000 per child, per year, for AWC and kindergarten, respectively, while allocating 1.5-2.2 percent of its GDP (Bal 2025; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Furthermore, the Central and State governments must promise to enhance budgetary allocations for the identification, recruitment, training, support, and retention of dedicated teachers at the pre-primary level.

Fifth, enhance data systems and establish a robust inspection framework for nearby Anganwadis and preschool sections within government schools. Enhanced data availability could facilitate review, reflection, and requisite corrective measures, as well as thorough monitoring of ECCE classes. Periodic school preparation surveys are essential for evaluating the overall state of the system. A comprehensive assessment survey could serve as a crucial forerunner to the analysis of results from existing achievement surveys done at the conclusion of the basic schooling period, including the 'National Achievement Survey' and the 'Foundational Learning Study'.

Sixth, a broad awareness campaign can be initiated for parents, highlighting their crucial role in their child's learning. Provide parents with the necessary resources, tools, and guidance to facilitate active participation in home learning activities, thereby enhancing the learning experience beyond formal environments.

Seventh, India should introduce a comprehensive system of government-funded teacher training in a phased manner, as a large section of 'Integrated Teacher Education Programme' (ITEP)-based institutions is compromising on standards and norms. Furthermore, ECCE aims to specialist childcare service suppliers by substituting contractual personnel with permanent, qualified, salaried educators, while enhancing working conditions.

Lastly, advocating for multilingualism while acknowledging children's native languages is essential for guaranteeing fair and high-quality access to ECCE Education services (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). The disparity among the child's native language, home tongue, regional language, and state language must be diminished at this period. Both governments must take immediate action to address variations in children's outcomes stemming from linguistic disparities in their homes, communities, and educational institutions. So, the child's language at home and in the community should be used as the medium of education at the basic stage.

Concluding Remarks

Presently, India occupies a prestigious worldwide standing due to its population composition. With almost 54% of its demography below 25 years old, the country can leverage a substantial economic dividend as this youthful labour enters the labour market and engages in economic activity. In India, the issue of providing food services to the 158.7 million children aged 0 to 6 (Census Report, 2011) for their all-around development is multifaceted. Therefore, India must prioritise a child's initial years by implementing a range of national and international best

practices to provide a robust foundation for ECCE (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). To fully harness this potential, it is essential for India to properly allocate all available assets regarding education and skill development, ensuring that the youth can make significant contributions to the economy. Worldwide, the evidence unequivocally indicates that expenditures in ECCE are crucial to realize this benefit. Adopting an integrated strategy for a child's health, nutrition, academic achievement, societal-emotional growth, and financial productivity is a viable means of reforming ECCE and attaining SDG 4.2 by 2030 (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). In recognition of this goal, the country's NEP 2020 has accorded significant focus to ECCE, incorporating it as a crucial part of school education and integrating it into the curriculum at the basic stages, including first and second grade. Likewise, India has just introduced an NCFFS (2022) to facilitate planning and execution. Delivering outstanding preschool education in a structured environment for children over three years old is a primary focus of the NEP 2020 (NCERT, 2022, p. 2). Historically, India has established a progressive policy framework to emphasise the importance of ECCE as a vital phase in human development. Nonetheless, this ECCE-focused approach required additional funding and advocacy to implement. It is clear that the lofty policy target of attaining universal, all-round, top-notch ECCE within the lens of SDG 4.2 can be realised through appropriate, strategic, and multifaceted action plans, coupled with robust political commitment. Hence, India will deliver quality ECCE that will help children lead productive lives.

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