Early Childhood Education in India: A Snapshot

ECED Brief - 2
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1. Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is gaining importance universally for its role in laying a strong foundation for the holistic development of a young child. It is conceptualized as an integrated provision for children from prenatal stage to 8 years, which addresses a child’s need for care, education, nutrition and health holistically, in consonance with a life cycle approach. These needs may be met through one unified source or program or through different sources, which may each converge on the child, the mother and the child’s physical and social environment, as a comprehensive mode.

Within ECCE, three sub stages can be identified-

(a) An Infant-toddler stage for children 3 years and below, who require family or crèche based protective, consistent and responsive care and a stimulating environment, along with adequate nutrition and health inputs; (b) An Early Childhood Education(ECE) stage, also known as the Preschool/Pre-primary school Education stage for children between 3 to 6 years, who require a centre/school based pre-primary education programme; (c) Early Primary stage for children between six to eight years. Although children between six to eight years are expected to be in primary school, they continue to be considered in the Early Childhood stage because they have developmental characteristics in common with the younger child. The smooth transition of these children from preschool to school becomes an area of concern and priority, in view of the significant drop outs in the early primary grades. At each of these sub stages, nutrition, care and health support continue to be important inputs, along with the educational content.

This document focuses primarily on reviewing the available data on Early Childhood Education(ECE), and on its basis presenting a snapshot of the status of ECE in India, which addresses children’s early learning and developmental needs from three to six years. It may be noted that this snapshot is significantly limited by the fragmented nature of the data available on ECE in the country.

2. Why this Policy Brief?

On one hand ECE is gaining attention internationally as well as in India,
as an important first step in the education ladder; On the other, it is difficult to make any assessment regarding the status of this sub-sector of education due to acute paucity of any reliable field based information. Data, when available, is scattered across multiple sources which are not always consistent, and there is also very little analysis. Any planning for expanding and improving ECCE services for children is therefore limited by this inadequacy of data, which if available, could have helped to draw up a comprehensive profile of this sub-stage of education in India and understand its gaps and challenges.

This document aims to review the existing data on 3-6 year old children which at present is limited to access, enrolment and identify data gaps. Therefore, the document while giving a broad overview of ECE, focuses mainly on estimating the extent to which ‘access’ to ECE is available across different regions of the country. In the process, it also aims to identify the emerging data gaps and make some significant recommendations.

The document addresses the following questions:

- Why is ECE important?
- Are there any policies supporting ECE in India?
- What are the major programs in ECE in India?
- Are there sufficient teacher educations institutions for teacher preparation in ECE?
- What is the current child population?
- What is the current status of enrolment of 3 to 6 year olds in ECE?

3. Why is Early Childhood Education Important?

The first six years of a child’s life are globally acknowledged as being the most critical years for lifelong development, since the pace of development during these years is extremely rapid (Fig 1). Recent research in the field of neuroscience, particularly of the brain, has provided very convincing evidence of ‘critical periods’ located within these early years for some specific competencies, which are of importance for life-long learning and development (Karoly et. al., 1998); in this context the early experiences of children and the stimulation they receive are very important for the forming of synaptic connections in the brain in these early years and for the full development of the brain’s potential.
A large number of children do not get an optimal child care environment in the earliest years of their lives, which can lead to developmental delays and deficits for life. Research within India and internationally has demonstrated the significant impact that ECE can make in terms of compensating for these deficits and enabling children to have a sound foundation. A major cohort study conducted retrospectively in eight states of the country demonstrated up to 20 percent impact of ECE on reduction in dropouts and continuation of children in primary grades, (NCERT, 1994).

ECE has two major objectives:

(i) To promote all round development of children in terms of physical, social, emotional, creative, language and cognitive development, through a play based, age/developmentally appropriate programme of activities and interactions which can provide them a head start for lifelong learning and development;

(ii) To develop in children school readiness through some specific kinds of play based, cognitive and language related activities and experiences which will foster in them skills and concepts related to readiness for learning of the 3R’s, prior to entry to primary schooling. However, it is important to note that learning at this early stage must be directed by the child’s interests and developmental priorities, and should be relevant to her family and social context and should
not be academic and formal in content and method. Unfortunately, studies that have looked at ECE programs around the country reveal a predominance of academic instruction being imparted at this stage, which is clearly indicative of a downward extension of the primary curriculum; this can well be counterproductive for children since they are not yet maturationally ready for this curriculum (CECED, 2012). There is empirical evidence to also substantiate the harm it can do in terms of putting academic pressure on the young mind, thus leading to a dependence on rote memorization and a weak conceptual foundation for later learning. The pressure can also result in the child learning the academic skills, but losing the disposition to use the skills, thus making the entire process counterproductive (Katz, 1995).

4. Are there any Policies Supporting ECE in India?

With ECE now getting acknowledged in India as well as internationally, as a significant support for child development and education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), India, has recently formulated a draft Policy on ECCE which is under due process. In a concurrent mode, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), India, has in response to demand from the states, set up a Sub-committee of Central Advisory Board of Education to examine the feasibility of extending the Right to Education (RTE, 2009) to children below 6 years. While these are more recent initiatives on the part of the Government of India, ECE has over the years been receiving some attention under existing laws and policies also. Some of the policies addressing ECE, although partially, are described below:

- **The National Policy on Education, (1986 & 1992)** views ECCE as a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development, as a feeder and support programme for primary education. It advocates for play and a joyful teaching learning at this stage and clearly articulates that “there shall be no formal teaching of the 3R’s at this stage.”

- **National Policy for the Child, (1974)** states that “It shall be the policy of the state to provide adequate services to children, both before and after birth and throughout the period of growth. The state progressively increases the scope of such services..."
so that, within a reasonable time, all children in the country enjoy optimum conditions for their balanced development.”

- **National Plan of Action (NPA), (1992)** aimed at the protection, survival, development, and growth of children and laid down specific time-bound goals and strategies for each of the areas.

- **The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009).** While RTE 2009 did not include children below 6 years, it addressed ECE under Section 11 as follows “with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years, the appropriate Government may make necessary arrangement for providing free pre-school education for such children”

- **Constitution of India (Amended Article 45).** Although the original Article 45 addressed educational needs of children below 6 years, the RTE excluded this age group. In response to the strong advocacy from civil society for its inclusion, the Article 45 was amended as follows “The State shall endeavor to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years.”

### 5. What are the Major ECE Programmes in India?

ECE provisions in India are available through three distinct channels - public, private and non-governmental. Public sponsored programs are largely directed towards the disadvantaged communities, particularly those residing in rural areas. The largest provision for ECE in India is the ICDS, which is in the public sector and has the distinction of being one of the largest integrated programmes for children below 6 years. It is comprised of six services, of which one is non-formal preschool education. The second largest provider is the private sector which is a completely unregulated sector at present. It is expanding at a very fast rate across the country, not only in urban but also in rural and tribal areas in many states.

Private initiatives refer to fee charging/profit making initiatives in ECE. In India, as elsewhere, ECE falls in a dual track mode. While the public sponsored ICDS caters to children from disadvantaged communities, private initiatives are
targeted towards children of socio-economically better off families. These impart pre-school education through nurseries, kindergarten and pre primary classes in private schools. In the absence of any system of regulation or even registration at the ECE stage, the education offered by these programs is of wide range. Some of these pre-schools are more of ‘teaching shops’ that do not respect/regard the developmental norms of children. In some cases the quality offered can be counter productive to children’s development and may even be described as ‘mis-education’ (Kaul, 1998; CECED, 2012). In addition, there are provisions for ECE in the NGO sector, however these are on a much smaller scale and sparsely distributed. Some of these are innovative and could also be considered ‘good practice’.

Analysis of Data - Some Findings

1. Are these ECE provisions equitably distributed across the country?

There is no consolidated data available to enable an accurate assessment of
the extent of provisions for ECE across the country. The status can only be estimated broadly on the basis of compilation of data from different sources. Table 1 presents the coverage of provision’s on the basis of this consolidation.

As evident from Table 1, the ICDS is the largest provider of pre-school education in the country. With the programme on its way to getting universalized, almost every village can boast of an Anganwadi or ECE center under this provision. In terms of scale, the next in order is the private sector, which is steadily expanding across the country, in not only urban but also rural and tribal areas, in many states. Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, ECE centres have been set up to facilitate girls’ participation in elementary schooling, by providing surrogate care to the younger siblings. These are largely in pockets where ICDS has not yet reached, to conform to the government policy of avoiding any duplication of facilities. In a few states pre-school sections have also been set up as part of the elementary schools.

A region wise comparison of data from the Education sector on ECE indicates significant regional differences (Fig 2). Some states such as Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya in the north eastern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programmes</th>
<th>No. of Centers in millions</th>
<th>No. of Children in millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Working Mothers</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-primary Sections attached with Primary Schools</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Services for ECCE</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No reliable data available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Initiatives</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(MWCD). Annual Report 2009-10, Chapter-4, Pg.48-49.(7)

Sources:

- Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2011(8);
- Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2011(6);
region and Haryana, Chandigarh, Jammu and Kashmir in the northern region, show a significant number of pre-primary schools attached with primary sections. However, in two states in the north eastern region i.e. Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, the number of schools with pre-primary sections has declined dramatically. While in the former, it declined from 91.4 percent in 2009-10 to 26 percent in 2010-11, the corresponding decline in Arunachal Pradesh was from 56 percent to 48 percent. This decline needs further probing. In the northern region Punjab, which had the lowest percentage of 3.3 percent, showed a significant increase by 11 percent within two years. However, the eastern region as a whole has insignificant number of preschool sections attached to the primary schools across the states. The overall increase in preschool sections attached to primary schools, in the north and northeast regions may be a reflection of public demand arising from spread of private initiatives, which enroll children in school at an early age.
Figure 2 - Region wise Analysis of Pre-Primary schools attached with Primary Schools

Pre-primary attached with Primary Schools (Northern Region)

Pre-primary attached with Primary Schools (Eastern Region)

Pre-primary attached with Primary Schools (N-E Region)

Pre-primary attached with Primary Schools (Southern Region)

Pre-primary attached with Primary Schools (W-C Region)

Source: DISE 2009-2011 (3)
2. Are Teacher Educations Institutions for Teacher Preparation equitably distributed?

According to a recent survey conducted by Center for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD) on Pre-primary teacher education institutes across the country, the distribution of these institutions is fairly inequitable, as evident in Fig 3. Some states, particularly in the north and north east, have almost no access to any teacher education institutes at all, while interestingly, they have higher percentage of pre-primary sections attached to schools, compared to the other states. In some states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, which earlier had a large presence of teacher education institutions in ECE, the numbers are now reportedly declining, due to low demand. Paradoxically, although the job market in this area

![Figure 3: State wise Distribution of Teacher Education Institutions](image-url)

Source: CECED, 2012 (13)
is expanding, the requirement for professional training of two years’ duration is not always there, due to absence of any regulatory requirement for training. Majority of institutions surveyed were found in the private sector, of which over 60 percent did not have recognition from National Council For Teacher Education (NCTE). Thus, the variations in standards and content have been indicated as a significant issue.

While data on provisions indicates an inequitable distribution, both in the case of ECE centers and Teacher preparation institutions, the next level of analysis looks at the enrolment patterns in ECE, given the scale of provisions.

3. What is the Current Child Population requiring ECE?

The Child Population in India for children from birth to 6 years is currently 158.8 million (Census, 2011). As per the census data, the overall child population has reduced by 5 million between 2001 and 2011, with the reduction more evident in the rural areas, due to demographic factors (Fig 3). While age-wise data is not available, it is estimated that about 60 million children are in the age group of 3 to 6 years; this is possibly the number of children who would require Early Childhood Education.

Figure 4. Child Population (Birth-6 Years) from 1961-2011

Source: Census 2011 - Provisional Population Totals - India (5)
4. What is the Current Status of Enrolment in ECE in India?

According to data quoted by UNESCO (Fig 5) there has been a steady incline in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for pre-primary education over the last twenty years, with the current GER touching a figure of 55%. It is not clear against which population data this GER has been computed, since real time data on population of 3 to 6 year olds is not available. However, the World Development Indicators (WDI, 2008) also places the GER for pre-primary to be around 53.8% for the year 2008, which is more or less comparable, given the two year difference. This consistency places some confidence in these statistics. These figures do indicate steady increase in enrolments, which could be attributed to the expansion of ICDS provisions across all habitations in the last few years, as well as to a lesser extent, to the growing private sector provisions. While this is a positive trend, it also highlights the significant enrolment gap and point towards the need to reach out to approximately another 30 million children, with some provision for pre-school education.

Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) for Pre-primary enrolment, which refers to the number of pupils in the theoretical age group who are enrolled, expressed as a percentage of the same population, is

![Figure 5. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Pre-primary Schools (1991-2010)](source: UNESCO, 2010 (14))
However not yet available.

This indicator reflects the efficiency of the system. Some data gaps that can thus be identified include age-wise data on population of 3 to 6 year olds, disaggregated by region, state, urban, rural, gender and other social categories. Correspondingly, there is also a lack of reliable enrollment and attendance data in this disaggregated mode.

5. What are the Emerging Patterns in Enrolment?

A. The Rural Context

(a) Time Series Data Trends:

The only source of time series data available on ECE is currently from the ASER annual survey; however, it is confined to the rural areas. Given the significant differences between the rural and urban scenarios, there can be no possibility of generalizations from this data for the country as a whole. However, this does reflect emerging trends in the rural context across states, which can be very revealing since it is here that the bulk of the population in India resides. The shifts if any in the rural scenario can also provide a mirror to changing trends in the urban sector.

The trends in the pattern of enrolment from 2006 through 2008 to 2010, as depicted in Figure 7, indicates some interesting patterns-

- A visible shift in trend: Both in
2006 and 2008 the enrolment figures were highest for the Anganwadis (AWs)/Balwadis, which cater to the socio-economically disadvantaged populations. However, in 2010 the trend changed with the highest enrolment being in the primary school, which includes both private and public schools (with preschool sections).

This shift could be due to two reasons: (a) the implementation of RTE in 2010, which led to enrolment of all six year olds in

Source: ASER (2006-2010) (1)
primary schools and (b) possible increase in migration of children to private preschools, due to parental misperceptions of quality.

- **Rates of children ‘not enrolled’**

  While the percentage of children ‘not enrolled’ reduced significantly from 2006 to 2008, the percentage has remained more or less stagnant in 2010. Simultaneously, the percentage of pre-school children in primary/private schools has increased. The issue is the increase in enrolments in primary/private schools due to the ‘not enrolled’ getting enrolled or is it due to migration from AWs/Balwadis to the primary/private schools, given the anecdotal evidence across states of large scale migration to private sector. This needs further probing.

- **Enrolment by Age and Categories of Provisions**

  An age-wise disaggregated analysis of data for 2010, which is the only year for which this data is available, indicates that 39.4 percent of the 5 year olds and 62.5 percent of the 6 year olds are in government primary schools, whereas the corresponding percentages for private school enrolments are 22.2 percent and 23.6 percent respectively. This is a significant number, considering that this data is only from the rural sector. This reflects the steady percolation of private provisions, even in rural areas now. It is however heartening to see the low percentage of 5 and 6 year olds in the ‘not enrolled’ category.

  A probe into the enrolment patterns of 3 and 4 year olds shows that about 63 percent of 3 and 4 year olds are enrolled in AWs/Balwadis. An interesting finding is that significantly more children seem to be going to the private kindergartens at age 4 rather than age 3, after which they seem to move to the primary schools. This is to be expected since in most states the age for admission to grade 1 is 5 years. Possibly parents feel the need for a more structured educational program for the child at the age of four years, when the child is becoming relatively more autonomous as a learner, and which an Anganwadi (AW) may not always offer.

  Interestingly, about 22 percent of 5 year olds and 5 percent of even 6 year olds, who should be in primary schools as per eligibility age in most states, continue to be in AWs, possibly due to sibling care responsibilities. This may indicate the need for relocation of ECE centers close to, or in the primary schools, to enable older children, particularly girls to attend school.

  A concern is that about 20 to 30
percent of the 3 and 4 year olds seem to be not enrolled anywhere at all, whereas they should be availing pre-school education facilities. Given that the AWs are now getting universalized, the issue is these children not enrolled in AWs due to the ceiling of 40 children per AW, which is the prescribed norm, or is it because they do not have any facility close to their habitation? If the overall GER of 55 percent is to be used as reference, the percentage not availing ECE is almost 45 percent. This may imply that a large number may be getting left out in the urban sector. This needs further investigation.

(c) Region-wise analysis of Age 5 enrolment:
A disaggregated analysis of region-wise enrolment of five year olds in rural settings also presents interesting trends.

A comparative analysis indicates that in the northern and southern regions of the country, the proportion of 5 year olds going to private schools is the highest, and almost equal to the government school enrolment. Further, in the southern region, if the proportion of children going to what are categorized as LKG/UKG is also included in the private school enrolment, the percentage of private enrolment becomes higher than that in government provisions. Similarly in the north eastern and western central regions too, if the proportion of children going to LKG/UKG is added to the private school enrolment, the percentage of private enrolment becomes quite significant, though the government school enrolment is still

Figure 9. Region wise Analysis of Enrolment Status for Age 5 in Rural India

Regionwise Analysis of Age 5 enrolment in different school settings in Rural India, 2010

Source: ASER, 2010 (1)
higher. In contrast to these, percentage of private school enrolment is barely 10 percent in the eastern region.

The proportion of 5 year olds not enrolled anywhere is also the lowest in the southern region, and highest in the northern region. This may due to the entry age for grade 1 being six years in some states, whereas in southern states it is 5 years.

(d) Region-wise analysis of Age 6 Enrolment:

A similar region-wise analysis at age 6 years depicts a slight shift in the trends.

While the pattern of private school enrolment remains similar as in the case of 5 year olds, with the percentage being lowest for the eastern region, the government school enrolment shows a definite and consistent increase across the regions. The percentage of children not enrolled is also smaller for this age group, as compared to the 5 year olds. This trend may possibly due to the RTE (2009) and related incentives available in the government system and could also reflect a trend of dual enrolments.

B. Rural and Urban Context

Region wise share of enrolment in Pre-primary classes to total enrolment in primary classes (2010-2011)

An analysis of data from DISE 2010-2011, which provides school based data for both urban and rural populations, further substantiates that the highest percentage of children enrolled in

Figure 10. Region wise Analysis of Enrolment Status for Age 6 in Rural India

Regionwise Analysis of Age 6 enrolment in different setting of schools in Rural India, 2010

Sources: ASER, 2010 (1)
Figure 11. Percentage share of Enrolment in Pre-primary Classes as compared to Primary Classes

Share Enrolment in Pre primary classes to total enrolment in Primary Classes Northern Region

Sources: DISE 2010-2011 (6)
Pre-primary schools are in the north eastern and southern regions. The highest percentage seems to be in Meghalaya and Nagaland, which is consistent with the data on pre-primary sections attached to primary schools discussed earlier.

**Enrolment Variations in Pre-primary as Compared to Primary Schools**

Data from a more dated source which provides an All India profile, further confirms the above findings regarding region wise comparisons. It indicates that pre-school enrolment is highest in the southern and north eastern regions and lowest in the eastern region, as compared to primary enrolment (Fig 12). This analysis does not take into account the ICDS enrolment, which may improve the figures for the eastern states.

The graph below shows the trend in average number of 3 to 6 year olds

**Sources:** SES, 2007-08 (6)
enrolled per AWC across the years. Interestingly this shows not only that the enrolment is not at the saturation level of 40 children, but there is also a tendency for enrolment to decline over years, possibly due to expansion of private school enrolment. This could also be due to significant increase in number of AWs that the number of children per AW declined. Besides, the extent to which ICDS is able to provide pre-school education is also a significant issue.

In Conclusion:

The above analysis has brought forth some interesting findings as summarized below:

1. The Gross enrolment ratio has expanded to about 55 percent over time, which is a significant improvement. The concern is that approximately 30 million children in the 3 to 6 age group are still to be provided for, which remains a significant challenge.

2. In terms of both ECE provisions for children and institutions for preparation of ECE teachers, the distribution across the country is significantly inequitable. Interestingly, while the north and north-eastern regions have more pre-school provisions, teacher preparation facilities are comparatively more deficient in these parts of the country, creating an anomalous situation.

3. The Eastern region is the most deficient in term of ECE provisions, particularly in terms of private provisions and centers attached to primary schools. This is substantiated by the fact that the enrolments in ECE in the eastern region are also correspondingly low.

4. Data trends from the rural sector indicate distinct increase in private provisioning for ECE and a definite movement in that direction in terms of enrolments.

5. There is a clear increase in the enrolment figures of 6 year olds, and these are largely in schools, possibly due to the RTE (2009) and due to availability of incentives. Only about 22 percent of five year olds and 5 percent of 6 year olds are found still enrolled in AWs; these may be due to compulsions of sibling care. This points to the need for AWs to be relocated in or near primary schools to facilitate older girls’ participation in school.

6. Interestingly, a larger proportion of 4 year olds in the rural sector seem to move to private/primary schools as compared to the 3 year olds, possibly
due to parental mis-perceptions of quality, as they may consider 4 year olds to be ready for formal reading and writing, which these facilities provide.

Some Recommendations:

- A major limitation in this study has been the non-availability of adequate data. Therefore, lack of reliable and robust data base for ECE is an urgent requirement, if any meaningful and efficient planning is to be done in this area. Given the increasing enrolments in the private schools, even across rural areas, the data base will need to be household rather than school-based, since at present with no regulation or registration, getting data from private schools is an issue.

- Almost 45 to 50 percent children in the 3 to 6 year age group are not accessing any preschool education, as per the available data. Within this category there are regional variations, for example, the eastern region reflecting both low provision and low enrolment. This has definite implications for states to strengthen the ECE component of the ICDS and take initiative under Section 11 of the RTE Act (2009) to expand facilities, with quality, for ECE to reach all children in these critical years of development. In this context, bringing ECE into the ambit of the RTE would be a step in the right direction.

- While the ECE enrolment is estimated for children from 3 to 6 years of age, there is an anomaly with regard to the age eligibility. In most states the entry age for grade 1 is 5 years. The RTE provides for 6 to 14 years, thus making enrolment from 6 years onwards mandatory. Yet, ICDS continues to cater to children from 3 to 6 years, which leads to a definite overlap and possible double counting in enrolment, leading to distortion of the enrolment profile. This needs to be urgently rationalized both from the perspective of planning and also from ensuring children receive age-appropriate education.

- In conclusion, the review and analysis of data available on ECE indicates that data from other surveys indicate possibilities of double enrolment in AWs and private schools, often due to availability of incentives. While data on enrolment is available, this does not necessarily reflect regular attendance and participation by children in the
respective programs.

- There is no data available on attendance to supplement the enrolment data. Recent studies conducted by CECED and ASER (2012) have highlighted this issue as significant in some states, particularly where private provisions are expanding.

- Attendance is also directly related to perceived quality of the program by the parents, so that even though private schools may not be always providing developmentally appropriate education, they are preferred over government provision.


4. Exploring impact of Early learning, socialization and school readiness experiences in pre-school settings on educational and behavioral outcomes along the primary stage. Center for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi and Assessment Survey Evaluation Research (ASER), New Delhi, India


