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Early Childhood Care and Education Initiatives in India: Provisions and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper uses a survey of secondary sources and reflection on the existing body of knowledge in the field of early childhood care and education policy and plans. It undertakes a brief review of policy statements on ECCE, exploring the arguments and understanding behind it, and the efforts that have been made. For the purpose of this paper, the term early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to all programmes where both learning and care occur for children under the age of six (before the start of formal schooling). ECCE or ECE as referred to in the review of studies includes studies on services as regulated child care services (part-day preschools or nursery schools, full-day child care centres and family child care homes) as well as pre-kindergarten programmes and kindergarten that support learning and care.

Introduction

India has the highest child population in the world. According to the Census of India, 2011, about 13.1% (158.78 million) of India's total population comprises children below the age of 6 years. Globally there has been concern about providing care and education to the children in the early years. Improving comprehensive early childhood care and education has been included as the first and foundational goal in the Education For All (EFA) goals set at Dakar (2000) which focus on the need to provide learning opportunities at every stage in life from infancy to adulthood. The fifth Global Monitoring Report defines early childhood care and education as "support for children's survival, growth, development and learning – including health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development – from birth to entry into primary school in formal, informal and non-formal settings."

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(UNESCO, 2007) This has prompted a serious look into quality education programmes for children in this group.

In Indian context, the provision of support in the form of early childhood care and education was not translated into an exclusive policy till so many years. However, it has been recently expressed in terms of draft policy. Therefore, trajectory of development in the area of early childhood care and education in India refers to the broad spectrum of statements and programmes launched to support care and education services for the young children.

Initiatives towards Investment in Early Years

Investment in overall development of young children was articulated as a priority even soon after independence. Pandit Nehru addressing the 28th session of CABE meeting on 16-17 January 1961 emphasised:

"When I say education, I don't mean just reading, writing and all that, but the capacity to do things in the modern world in several and thousand ways. And this leads inevitably to the spread of education, to all the country. That, of course ought to be done at the initial stages, and the initial stages, it is now recognised, begin from the birth, not from your primary school, but from the pre primary school. That is highly important."

At independence, pre-school education was primarily in the hands of a few voluntary organisations (Aggarwal, 1992). This status-quo was continued with schemes for financial support for the voluntary sector during the 1960s, leaving them with the major responsibility of developing child-care/ development services. Preschool education became a welfare concern of the government as the 'Family and Child Welfare Scheme' in 1968 after the Ganga Saran Sinha Committee. Comprehensive child welfare services to preschool children for all round development were provided under this scheme.

The 1970s marked a shift from welfare to development and accordingly child welfare services were expanded to include aspects of health, education, nutrition, etc. Different initiatives in various departments for well-being of infants, children under 6 years and pregnant and lactating mothers were sought to be integrated.

If we look at Constitutional Provisions, the National Policy for the Children, 1974 and the National Policy on Education, 1986, all these three important facets throw light on policy perspective in early education and care in India. Provision of services to address multifaceted needs of young children was accorded a high priority in the National Policy for Children, 1974. It enunciated this concern as "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 is also

committed to 'progressively increase' these services so that all children in the country enjoy optimum conditions for their growth. To achieve these objectives, it called for the adoption of following measures – comprehensive health programme; provision of nutritional services; free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14 years; provision of non-formal education; provision of special assistance to children belonging to the weaker sections of society; upliftment of children in distress; protection against neglect, cruelty and exploitation of children; protection against child labour; provision of special facilities for children ailing from various kinds of disabilities and encouragement and assistance to gifted children especially those belonging to the weaker sections of the society.

The constitutional commitment of Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy) which directed the state to provide "free and compulsory education for children up to fourteen years of age" was diluted by the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002). Article 45 was bifurcated into two age groups, 0-6 years and 6-14 years. While the new Article 21A makes elementary education for 6-14 years a Fundamental Right, the replaced version of Article 45 now reads as "The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the age of six years." Thus ECCE remains a constitutional commitment but not as a justiciable right of every child in the country. Earlier in 1968, preschool education was a welfare concern of the government, it was more focused on health and nutrition for child survival and disease control. After the formulation of National Policy for Children, it marked a shift from welfare to development, and accordingly, child welfare services were expanded to include aspects of health, education, nutrition, etc. It emphasised the need to invest in the development of young children belonging to the poverty group. It enunciated this concern as "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 also committed to 'progressively increase' these services so that all children in the country enjoy optimum conditions for their growth.

The National Policy on Education, formulated ten years after this in 1986, made the clear connection between ECCE and inclusion by emphasising its need for "first generation learners." National Policy on Education, and Programme of Action (1986, 1992):

"The National Policy on Children specially emphasises investment in the development of young child, particularly children from sections of the population in which first generation learners predominate.

"Recognising the holistic nature of child development, viz., nutrition,

health and social, mental, physical, moral and emotional development, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) will receive high priority and be suitably integrated with the Integrated Child Development Services scheme, wherever possible. Day care centres will be provided as a support service for universalization of primary education, to enable girls engaged in sibling care to attend school and as a support service for working women belonging to poorer sections.

"Programmes of ECCE will be child oriented, focus around play and the individuality of the child. Formal methods and introduction of the 3 R's will be discouraged at this stage. The local community will be fully involved in these programmes." An effort was thus made to state the objectives of early interventions for children and their nature.

A Discussion on the Initiatives

It is important to unfold the layers of assumptions, arguments and reasoning under these policies and subsequent changes. What is the framework in which policy objectives and priorities are being defined? The policy structure descriptions covering relevant programmes, organizations, actors, and their formal relationships and legal settings, are also illuminating.

Looking at the policy objectives first, we see that the need for early childhood education was not articulated in itself for the first twenty years after independence. The Constitution mentioned the educational needs of the broad age-group of 0-14-year-old children and till 1968 (Kothari Commission) ECCE was perceived as a luxury. It was not a 'necessary' precursor, only a recommended foundation to the educational journey of a child. The development orientation came following developments at the international stage, wherein a framework for policies relating to children was outlined in the National Policy of the Child, 1974.

While in most countries ECCE services emerged first as a response to the needs of abandoned, deprived or neglected children, it developed on different lines and times in the European and North American countries and contrasted with the developing world (Kammerman, 2006). Formalisation of early childhood provision beginning in the early 19th century catered to the demands of an emerging middle-class which was compelled by industrialisation, urbanisation, internal migration to look for a safe and affordable environment for their children which also provided an enriching pre-school education to prepare them for primary schooling.

The development of ECE in India reflects its growth in other developing countries beginning typically since 1970, which emerged as a larger package of health and care for young children whose basic needs were not being met. As such, governmental

responsibility focused on infant and child health, poverty reduction, safe and affordable environments for child-minding, and the transition to primary schooling (UNESCO, 2007). While most clear in terms of differing objectives and nature of early intervention programmes for children in the western world contrasted with the Third world, even within countries, this difference has been expressed by preschools and nurseries for the rich, and state-funded health-oriented programmes for poor children.

Through the successive Five Year Plans, the understanding and appreciation of ECCE has undergone major changes from the perspective of child welfare to a new understanding of child development in the background of the rights framework. Policies operate not just through texts but also through the *discourses* of particular time-periods, which led to emergence of or influence on new programmes (Codd, 2007). The provision of ECCE by private and voluntary bodies supported through different grant-in-aid schemes was followed by the first scheme only in 1968 to take a welfare approach – Family and Child Welfare Scheme. The development aspect came into focus with the Fifth Five Year Plan, as integration for different initiatives in various departments was advocated. The influence of this thinking led to the National Policy for Children, 1974 and is still evident in successive plans and policy documents. Internationally, the ratification of the Convention on Rights of the Child in 1992 led to a new thinking in terms of Child Rights which was expressed in the Eighth Five Year Plan.

Every plan document since the Eighth Plan has mentioned the need for ECCE/day care services to relieve girls for schooling and women for work. Targeting the opening of Anganwadi Centres (AWC) in known backward areas was also recommended by various plans. Thus, the goal of inclusion has been part of the ECCE policy discourse.

Infact, the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) emphasised the significance of sound early childhood education programmes stating that the development of children is the first priority on the country's development agenda, not because they are the most vulnerable, but because they are our supreme assets and also the future human resources of the country. There is an urgent need to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood programmes in India. Critical to this, is a need for awareness of and demand for the significance of sustainable quality early childhood education programmes that consider the diverse needs of each child.

The 10th Plan sought to ensure the rights of children along with a legal base and major strategies were envisaged to reach out to every young child in the country to ensure survival, protection and development. The 11th Plan went a step further in putting the 'development

of children at the centre of the plan' and claimed that its recommendations are based on rights-based, holistic and integrated framework for ECCE.

A host of issues were mentioned in the sub-group report on ECE for the 11th Plan. It also posed the question of curriculum setting and the hazards surrounding it and working conditions of ECE teachers/child care workers besides some of the issues discussed here.

The Eleventh Five Year Plan clearly stated that the "PSE component of ICDS-Anganwadi is very weak with repetition high and learning levels low. This in turn discourages many children from continuing their education. SSA will have a component of one year pre-primary, which can be universalised to cover 2.4 crore children in a phased manner. This is critical for school readiness/entry with increased basic vocabulary and conceptual abilities that help school retention. Besides, it will free the girl child of sibling care. The existing coverage of pre-primary classes in schools is over 11 million."

Further to this the Approach Paper to Twelfth Five Year stated that there is need for funding for pre-school children under Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), especially in special focus districts as one of the measures required enhancing provision and improving quality of elementary education.

The document on Twelfth Five year Plan states that "As a society, we therefore need to move as rapidly as possible to the ideal of giving every child in India a fair opportunity in life, which means assuring every child access to good health and quality education. While this may not be possible to achieve in one Plan period, the Twelfth Plan should aim at making substantial progress in this dimension.

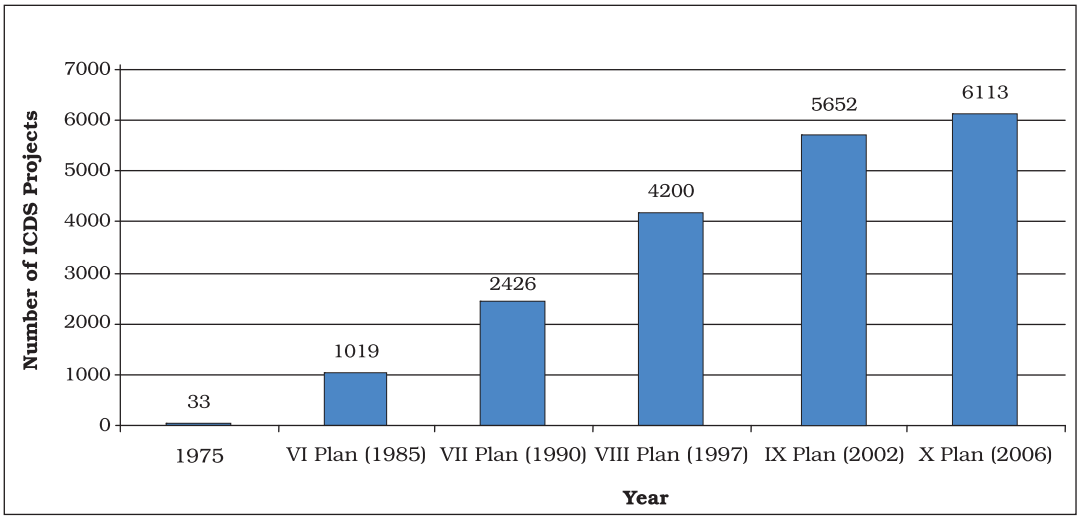
Any commitment for the child has been viewed implicitly to be conditioned on the availability of funds, appropriate time and societal conditions. A policy statement that allocates values or redistributes power is at least ostensibly situated on a logical reasoning of fund availability and feasibility (Rizvi, 2007). The earliest constitutional commitment to ensure free and compulsory education for all children until age fourteen failed to gather the attention of policy-makers for fifty years, which could be translated into a fundamental right only in 2002 (beginning in 1999). And just as simply that taking full responsibility for children's education was avoided so long, the responsibility of all children has been circumvented by pushing out children under six. The exclusion of the 3-6 years age group from constitutional commitments has been noted as an issue in the 10th Plan Mid-term Assessment report, and the 11th Plan sub-group on ECE. While this decision has been taken under the guise of 'comprehensive needs of the young child not being limited to education' and 'non-availability of funds', the lack of political will and social pressure is

the more evident and important truth. The care and development of children is seen as more of a parental responsibility and state involvement becomes optional, saving it from obligations of formulating laws or setting up institutions and putting aside money. This implicit belief held true for many years for education of children, and is likely to hold out a bit longer for comprehensive care for young children.

However, this dispassionate mechanical conception of policy analysis – where value-neutrality of efficiency and viability arguments is assumed – has been greatly criticized (Rizvi, 2007). Separating educational policies or reforms from the broader social context in which programmes operate and schools function, and undermining the effect of status-quo its pressures on deflecting any reform agenda are common fallacies made by policy analysts (Kovach, 2007). The division of labour between policy advocates and policy analysts provides a hint to different values and different socio-political assumptions which might be leading to un-conclusive analysis of why a policy failed or remained ineffective. Using this lens, some lessons can be drawn for ECCE policy in India. The policy mandate of providing ECCE for first generation learners, for supporting efforts of universalization of primary education, enabling girls to attend school and support for working women belonging to poorer sections – all are targets for weaker sections in society. Thus, ECCE was (is) most valuable to the sections of society with the least voice in the political process. A practical analysis of policy effectiveness cannot disregard this fact which might affect the implementation of policy – on the kinds of programmes launched, rules made or actors involved.

Translation of Policy to Action Plans

Policy is translated into action through governmental schemes and programmes. The comprehensive view of child development taken up by the NPC was soon followed by the first-ever complete package programme for deprived and needy children – the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. Beginning with an experimental thirty-three blocks, the coverage today is close to universalisation. The scheme adopts a multi-sectoral approach to child well-being, incorporating health, education and nutrition interventions, and is implemented through a network of *anganwadi* centres (AWCs) at the community level. At these centres, *anganwadi* workers and their helpers provide eight key services to 0-6 year old children along with expectant and nursing mothers, covering supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups and referral services, health and nutrition education to adult women, micronutrient supplementation and pre-school education for 3 to 6-year-old children.



Source: Calculated from MWCD, and Planning Commission Reports

Fig. 1: Expansion of ICDS Projects over the Plan Periods 1975–2006

Looking at the objectives, the ICDS had a clear focus on the nutritional and health status of preschool children in the age group of 0-6 years. To this end, attention was to be paid to supplementary nutrition for children and mothers, prenatal and ante-natal counselling and care services for the mother, besides a non-formal preschool component. It is instructive here, to look back at the National Policy on Children, and Education (1974 and 1986). The arguments for ECCE that are professed in the policies make a clear linkage between ECE and schooling, and its severe need among the unprivileged first generation learners. The value of ECCE for children from families with low-income or other social disadvantages has been proved in various studies (Bryant & Maxwell, 1997; Yoshikawa 1995 and NIPCCD, 1999 to name a few). However, the first (and only programme as of today) programme to address this need deflects the attention to the health and nutrition needs, tacitly ignoring the education component by making light of ECE under non-formal play learning. As a result, the anganwadi worker– who is not a teacher – is unable to value or focus on it. The goals of inclusion which could have easily fit into rounds of policy revision and programme formation were not associated with preschool education.

Policy analysis cannot move ahead without looking at the relevant organizational structure, actors, financial allocations and legal settings.

The ICDS scheme initially operated under the Ministry of HRD, Director of Child Development, who looked at the coordination between different parts of the service provided by Department of Social Welfare, Health and Women and Child Welfare at state levels. A shift in policies in 1993 led to the new Ministry of Social Welfare taking up the responsibility of coordination with a decreased mandate. However, this did not last long, and after much debate, all ECE responsibility was conclusively transferred to MWCD in the year 2006 as part of the services provided under ICDS, making it a ministry (NIPCCD, 2006). It remains to be seen if this association with ICDS reduces or deflects attention from preschool to nutrition. As of now, the widely recommended policy of a single department responsibility has been given to MWCD, making ICDS the mainstream provider of preschool education in India. The scheme has been centrally assisted since its inception, with 100 per cent financial assistance for inputs like infrastructure, salaries and honorarium for ICDS staff, training, basic medical equipment including medicines, play school learning kits, etc. However, states provide supplementary nutrition out of their own resources. The scheme has been generously supported by different International bodies like World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO and UNAID.

In the recent past there has been large scale expansion in the provision of ECCE centres as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme has been universalized and now there are 14 lakh Anganwadi Centres sanctioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, covering each and every habitation of the country.

The interventions did have made some impact on the neonatal mortality rate as it has slowed down. However even then most of the infants die during the neonatal period and many of the newborns are having low birth weight, i.e. less than 2.5 kg.

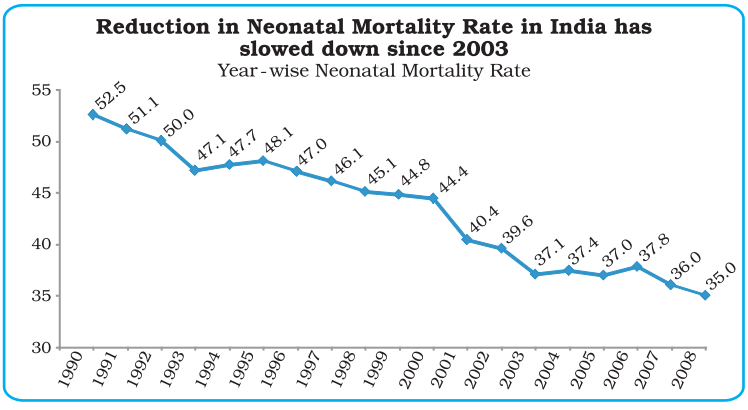
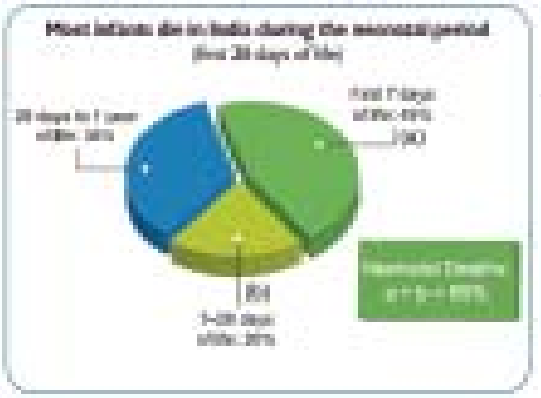
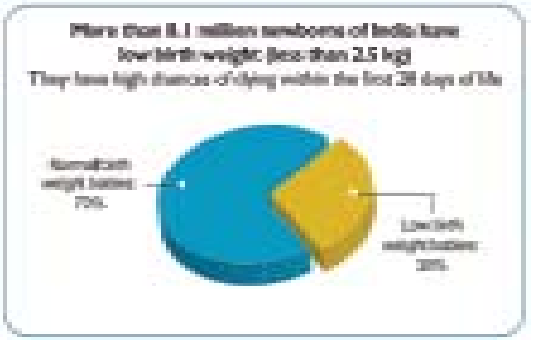
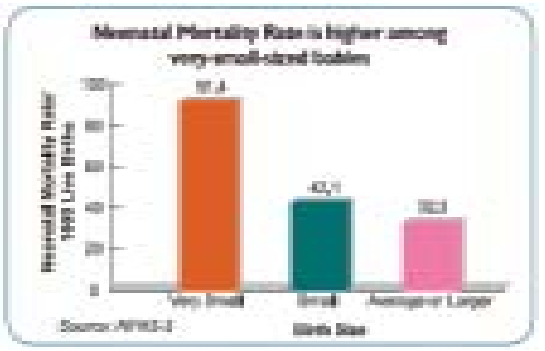


Fig. 2: Status of Neonatal Births







While the establishment of policy may be an important step in building effective systems, unless the policy is designed to address the major issues and unless there is a strong implementation plan that is carried out well, the impact of the policy may be minimal. The main actor in the ICDS service delivery mechanism is a minimally educated locally resident woman appointed on the honorary post of 'anganwadi worker' (AWW) assisted by another local untrained woman known as the helper (AWH). The AWW is supposed to be a voluntary good-will based position, much less than that of a job. As a result, this key actor gets a pittance for a long list of services which cover everything from record-maintenance, guidance-counselling, handing out supplementary nutrition to every child, immunization and weight tracking, health inspection and preschool classes. As has been reported often, the overburdened AWW is the weakest link in the implementation plan of the ambitious ICDS scheme (Swaminathan, 1998, MWCD 2007, NIPCCD 2006).

Reviews of ICDS show that access to services is heavily dependent upon locality and particular anganwadi worker, as awareness of ECE and its importance has not been included in the programme. The behaviour change that is intended (all children attending non-formal playschool) is actually based on a presumption of prior knowledge and values of recipients. While the ECE policy statements are clear on the need for ECE to relieve girls for schooling and women for work, this rationale is not part of an AWW's work.

Besides the ICDS, provision of ECCE in India is also available through NGO operated balwadis, crèches, pre-primary sections attached to

government and private schools. As a result, estimating the access to preschool for a general populace is difficult. The Report of the Sub-Group on ECE appointed for recommendations for the 11th Plan provides a telling picture of the state of access in ECCE. While the average enrolment for India is between 20 and 30 per cent, none of the major states having even half of their children in preschools (GOI, 2006). Though it cannot be denied that enrolments under public and private services have increased in the last 10 years, more than 70 per cent of the child population in the deserving age group is still missing.

While there have been efforts made by the Department of Elementary Education to supplement the efforts under ICDS (the Scheme of Early Childhood Education was introduced as a strategy to reduce dropout rate and improve the rate of retention in 1982, but discontinued soon; preschool centres were opened under DPEP project schools) these ECE efforts have been directed as complementary rather than necessary. This approach continues under the prevalent umbrella programme of education – *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*. The SSA programme had provision for taking up ECE projects on a small scale, under the 'innovations' head. This could be utilized either for setting up new centres in areas where there are no ICDS centres or for strengthening linkages with the ICDS programme. This complementary approach provides that no obligation for the preschool component is necessary in other areas.

A wide variety of service providers in the private field cater to the growing demand of ECE, particularly in urban areas. Most of these run like mini schools and emphasise formal education at an early age which can be more harmful for child's development. This private provision remains uneven and unruly, with not even registration in many states (Das, 2003). These teaching shops also do not follow any norms with regard to infrastructure, water and sanitation facilities, space for indoor and outdoor activities, adult-child ratio, availability of right kind of materials, and above all sensitive teachers with adequate training. The need for quality standards and regulations to safeguard against inequalities and integration for smooth coordination cannot be overstated.

The draft quality standards for ECCE on the website of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, specify the standards and norms to be followed by the ECCE centres. The Working Group Report on Child Rights, 12th Five Year Plan also mentions about formulation of National ECCE Policy and laying down of Quality norms and standards for ECCE provisions. But these are, as yet, policy statements on paper and would take long to actualize on the ground.

Michelle J. Neuman, Special Advisor on Early Childhood Care and Education for the 2007 EFA Global

Monitoring Report Team, recommended that it was necessary to "establish regulations and monitoring systems that apply equally to the full range of public and private settings. Limited regulation of the private sector can negatively affect access and quality, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Instead, policy could require providers receiving public funds to meet or exceed national quality guidelines and follow a national fee scale" (UNESCO, 2002).

Conclusion

The policy analysis of select documents in India shows the clear concern for the first generation learners and 'needy children'. However there is strong need to go back to the policy intentions and rationale professed in 1986 and make a clear link between need for ECCE and the goals of inclusion. A cursory look at the evidence base of the effectiveness of ECCE shows that good quality ECCE is critical in the initial years for a child from an unprivileged family background to catch up with other students in his class, bestowing him with only a small push, which nevertheless leaves him an equal at the start-line. Thus, it is most valuable to the sections of society with the least voice in the political process. The policy-makers must acknowledge the fact that the greatest strength of ECCE has been overlooked and ignored. This weakness could be turned around into strength if ECCE is conceptualized as a strong means to achieve goals of inclusion and equity, the pressures and investments for which are higher and easier. Besides increased investments as advocated by various review reports, there is also a need to redirect the focus of the ECCE policy and address intentional efforts towards this.

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