

## The National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework, 2014, and its Implications for Practice

### Abstract

National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework 2014 is a significant milestone in articulating the key objectives of an early childhood program and process important for an early childhood teacher and a centre to follow. This paper examines the ECCE curriculum framework on parameters outlined for a Curriculum Framework in the position paper of the National Focus Group on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks brought out by the NCERT. Alongside, it provides an overview of the National ECCE curriculum framework. Further, it suggests some necessary steps required to translate the aims articulated in the curriculum framework to prepare and educate all stakeholders involved in offering early childhood programs – parents, teacher educators, teachers, caregivers, centre managers, other functionaries engaged with planning and implementing early childhood programs.

### 1. Introduction

The field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India has shown steady but substantial move towards bringing recognition and policy emphasis for care and education of children below eight years of age in the past decade. While programs for children from marginalized sections, and other socio-economic classes have co-existed in our country for decades, a systematic policy recognition and provisions for it has taken a long while and struggle of several years to reach some major milestones in the field of ECCE.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 through its *Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)* laid a detailed backdrop of the significance of ECCE, global and local contexts that influence, the nature of early childhood programs and critical importance of the early years,

historical backdrop of the domain in India, the various inter-sectoral policy provisions for mothers and children below eight years of age. The document discusses the issues and challenges of equity, access, quality and issues of early language development alongwith questions of multilingualism, mother-tongue, and English emphasis. It further highlights the need for a Curriculum Framework for ECCE, and outlines the key curricular and pedagogical considerations for children of different age groups - Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers (Birth –2+), Curricular Framework for 3–5+ children; other issues regarding 3–5+ children; Curriculum in the early primary grades, 6–8+ children.

This was followed by the much awaited provisioning of a *National Policy on ECCE in 2013* by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The policy laid out critical provisions of enabling safe, nourishing environment for children below eight of years of

age across various socio-economic-cultural-regional contexts of the country. Quality Standards document supplementing the policy provisions further specified standards of delivery for ECCE programs.

Further, *the National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework, 2014* (referred to as NCF ECCE 2014 hereafter) is a historic contribution to the domain. This document builds on aspects outlined in the ECCE position paper and lays the foundational aspects critical for a quality ECCE curriculum across diverse settings.

This paper provides an overview of the key elements of National ECCE curriculum framework 2014 and discusses steps for effective implementation of the recommendations made in the curriculum framework across pre-school settings.

## **2. National Curriculum Framework on Early Childhood Care and Education– An Overview of Key Elements of the Framework**

A curriculum is broadly referred to as ‘plan of facilitating learning in a child’. A fuller definition borrowed from position paper of the National Focus Group on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks suggests, “*Curriculum is, perhaps, best thought of as that set of planned activities which are designed to implement a particular educational aim – set of such aims – in terms of the content of what is to be taught and the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are to be deliberately fostered*” (Winch) together with statements of criteria for selection of content, and choices in methods, materials and evaluation. (Stenhouse)” (as cited in NCERT 2006, pp. 12).

The structure of a curriculum framework proposed in this position paper is as follows:

- 2.1** Foundations of a curriculum- includes, assumptions concerning human beings and society; epistemological assumptions; assumptions about learning; assumed understanding about the child and her context.
- 2.2** These foundational assumptions further guide the *Core of a curriculum*. i.e. Aims of education; stage specific objectives; principles of content selection and organization; criteria for good methods; criteria for good material; and principles of evaluation. This is a two-way and continuous process that would keep refining with every cycle of curriculum execution.
- 2.3** The Curriculum details follow from each of these core elements:
  - a. Stage specific objectives and principles of content selection and organization guide the formulation of actual syllabus. These together with the criteria for good methods guide the classroom practice and criteria for good material available in classrooms.
  - b. Similarly, principles of evaluation guide the actual scheme of evaluation – i.e. formative evaluation such as use of checklists based on continuous observation, portfolios and records of children’s work, and so on; Or more summative evaluation to test overall progress of children.

An analysis of the NCF ECCE 2014 in light of the above criteria for a curriculum framework is attempted below. This exercise in parallel also provides an overview of the key ideas and processes recommended in the NCF ECCE 2014.

- 2.1 Foundations of the has been Curriculum:** The foundation articulated in parts of Section 1, titled Foundations of Early Care

and Learning in the Curriculum Document, pages 4 to 9. This highlights:

2.1.1 *Assumptions concerning Human beings and Society:* Growth and Development of children is most rapid in the first six years of life. 90% of brain development occurs before 6 years of age as per neuro science research. Psycho-social stimulation is equally critical as health and nutrition for ensuring optimal development of children. Children who do not receive psycho-social stimulation (i.e. limited social, emotional, cognitive, language and creative inputs) are likely to remain 'at-risk' in terms of 'life chances and opportunities'. (pp. 7).

2.1.2 *Epistemological Assumptions:* The understanding of child-development theories, and neuro-science evidence guide the significance of working with young children and planning early childhood development programs.

Appropriate positive environment will ensure cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, psycho-motor development for all individuals. The understanding of 'critical periods' or 'sensitive periods' would enable planning for appropriate learning opportunities and developmental delays.

Assumptions about working with children are guided by theoretical views emphasized by Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori, Dewey along with Indian thinkers such as Gandhi,

Tagore, Aurobindo, Gijubhai Badheka, Tarabai Modak. They emphasised upon the ideas such as child's interest should be the starting point of activities for the child, everyday experiences provide rich opportunities for learning, action and direct observation are the key ways to educate. Besides this, focus was also on the importance of exploration, rhyme, rhythm, music, movement, learning in mother tongue, amidst nature, integrating the principles of child-centered education.

2.1.3 *Assumptions about Learning:* Principles of Child Development and learning given by Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Gardner guide the understanding of how children learn. i.e. Children's learning and development happen in socio-cultural context, and children constantly construct their understanding of the world around them and make sense of the perceptions and experiences. The role of a more knowledgeable other is critical in children's process of learning and meaning making. Play is a significant part of this process of learning and exploration.

Several other principles of early learning such as children are curious, engage in learning from birth, build on previous experiences, learn in a context through direct experiences are enlisted forming the foundations for early learning.

2.1.4 *Assumed Understanding about Child and Her Context:* The NCF ECCE acknowledges the diverse and varied geographic,

social, cultural, linguistic, and economic context that families of young children in Indian society belong to, and the diverse needs and strengths each family offers to the child. It borrows the vision of the Indian child articulated in the National ECCE Policy 2013 to provide “nurturance and promotion of holistic development and active learning capacity of all children below 6 years of age by promoting free, universal, inclusive, equitable, joyful and contextualised opportunities for laying foundation for development and attaining full potential”. The curriculum further builds on that vision and views “children as happy, healthy and confident; each child with unique identity, grounded in their individual strengths and capacities; and with respect for their unique social, linguistic, and cultural heritage and diversity.” (pp. 6)

**2.2. Curriculum Core:** Based on the above foundational principles of the domain of Early Childhood Care and Education, the Core of the curriculum get articulate in part 2 of the section 1 in the curriculum document i.e. pages 1 to 24. The specifics of objectives, and core of stage wise curriculum and organization principles are articulated in detail in Section 2 on Goals and Development of Learning pages 25 to 42 of the NCF ECCE.

2.2.1 *Aims of Education:* To put it simply, the aim of early childhood care and development program is ‘holistic development of a child’. Articulated as broad

objectives of the early childhood care and education program, the curriculum framework emphasizes the ‘need for holistic and overall development that will facilitate a child’s learning and development and lay foundation for helping the child achieve her full potential’. The curriculum framework further articulates several specific objectives across development domains – i.e. language, physical motor, cognitive, aesthetic, ethics, along with nutrition routine, health and hygiene habits, respecting each child’s individuality and enabling positive self-concept, transition from home to preschool and preschool to school, and promoting development of an overall personality.

2.2.2 *Stage Specific Objectives:* The curriculum framework divides the learning and development of children in two sub-stages:

*Stage 1:* Birth to 3 years where the focus is on care, stimulation and interaction i.e. survival, safety, protective environment, health care, nutrition including infant and young child feeding practices for the first six months, attachment to an adult, opportunity for psycho-social stimulation and early interaction in safe, nurturing and stimulating environments within the home and appropriate child care centres.

*Stage 2:* From 3 to 6 years where the key goal is care, early learning and school readiness, protection from hazards, health care, nutrition, attachment to an adult, developmentally

appropriate play-based preschool education with a structured and planned school readiness component for 5 to 6 year olds. Inter-relationship between each domain of development and specific development milestones/learning objectives in each sub-stage have been elucidated.

2.2.3. *Principles of Content Selection and Organization; Criteria for Good Methods:*

'Play' in its different forms and stages is considered the most critical element of early learning opportunity and environment. Along with play, activities that are well-planned, implying a series of experiences which provide cognitive and physical stimulation and are challenging enough to learn a concept, are emphasized as the foremost elements of the process of learning. These are key guiding principle for content selection and methods of engaging children.

Further, the NCF ECCE 2014 organizes the overall curriculum-learning goals and practices with *Context, Content and Process* as the three core components. It articulates each with reference to content selection, organization, pedagogy, and material selection.

- Context- where in learning takes place, the environment where the child belongs.
- Content- The specific goals within each domain of development that guide the activity to be undertaken.
- Process- the 'how' of each activity, the pedagogy that adults and caregivers in

the child's environment use to create an enabling environment for that learning goal.

Each of these three components have been articulated with reference to the stages 2. For instance, for children in stage 2, i.e. 3 to 6 years of age, the content and themes can emerging from immediate environments and then moving to peripheral and abstract concepts, including themes related to child's self, relationship with people and understanding of the world around. Some other criterion are inter-connected learning opportunities, linking across different learning experiences, reflecting real life contexts of children, use of different materials and activities to revisit concepts often to strengthen their understanding and so on.

The NCF ECCE 2014 further recommends that the curriculum for young children should center on the principle of children's increasing ability to learn complex concepts and suggests 'Spiral Curriculum' as one of the organizing principles. This suggest initially learning with concrete objects in simpler action-based forms, pictorial to abstract forms, and the same concepts revisited at more complex levels.

For this age group a program that is sensitive to young children's attention span is needed. This implies organizing focused activities for 15-20 minutes. A routine that four-hour long program

with, providing flexible learning environment, break times, nap times with some routine activities. A develops a sense of security in children through a combination of 'structured and unstructured; active and quiet; outdoor and indoor; self-directed and adult initiated, individual, small group or large group learning activities. These should relate to child's environment and be enjoyable and challenging for children' (pp. 40). It, recommends that groups to be based on interests and styles, and ability levels of learners and their age. Active parental support and involvement to enable a close home-school connect; community partnerships to enable resource contribution and healthy school relationships among all stakeholders, i.e., family, school staff, children and so on.

The framework elucidates each process in the Program Planning and Practices section 3. It gives Do's and Don'ts and key points for creating a suitable and enabling learning environment.

The curriculum framework for ECCE further outlines the details of the curricular activities, for both development stages along with the developmental objectives. Here the document begins to move out of the realm of conceptual framework, and provides specific details of 'what to' and 'how to'.

The issues of multilingualism, multi-age, multi-level grouping, inclusion, school readiness, and so on are also elucidated at length along with practices for creating the appropriate learning environments based on theoretically guided ideas for practice.

The roles of teachers, parents, administrators/centre managers have been further specified in the section on planning ECCE programs.

#### 2.2.4. Criteria for Good Material:

To create a stimulating environment for early learning, the material ought to be varied, stimulating, local, age and developmentally appropriate, so as to trigger a child's curiosity, sustain interest and motivation for learning. Safety and hygienic condition i.e. clean and toxic free material is also recommended as a criterion.

The materials can be multipurpose to be used both at home and in school or can be specific. Similarly they can be for both parents and children to use or be specific, natural and locally created material by craftsmen, parents, teachers, is another criteria to make the program creative and sustainable. The framework gives an indicative list of indoor and outdoor materials as well.

#### 2.2.5. Principles of Evaluation: Pages

57 to 60 of the NCF ECCE 2014 articulate the purpose, principles process of evaluation. It envisages two fold purpose for assessment gauging the progress in learning and development, enabling early identification of developmental delays, special learning needs of a child. This will provide useful information for appropriate intervention and engagement; a feedback to the early childhood program; leading evaluation, revision and changes. The emphasis is that the nature of assessment be purely qualitative with no test-based assessment. Home-based

assessments by parents are recommended to get a holistic picture of the child's learning and development. Various methods of assessment such as collection of children's work, anecdotal records, photographs of work undertaken, health progress and so on are suggested. A developmental checklist across developmental domains is given.

**2.3. Curriculum Details:** The ECCE curriculum framework document in sections 2 and 3 specifies several details such as age and stage specific objectives, specific themes and content, nature of activities to be undertaken across developmental domains, It also gives the long-term, mid-term, short-term goals an indicative daily routine, nature and type of teaching learning material, and guidelines for an appropriate evaluation scheme for assessing young children. Several of these elements fall outside the realm of curriculum framework as defined earlier. However, it does not lay out the full schedule or a theme-wise twelve month plan, day wise. This typically would form the syllabus. These are more specific details that each program would ideally individually work out depending on the broad curricular goals and guidelines.

**2.4. Overall Observations:**

2.4.1. Early childhood care and education has usually been considered an intuitive endeavor between mother care given and child for very young children, and as a preparation for schooling for 3+ children. Several models based on a particular philosophies or those

following eclectic approaches are prevalent in the country as this sector is unregulated. In this context, the NCF ECCE 2014 is a welcome step.

2.4.2. From the above analysis, the NCF ECCE 2014 comes across as a comprehensive document that fulfilling the criteria of a curriculum framework. At several instances, it moves beyond stating the guiding principles gives several specific suggestions to implement the curriculum core. Given the dearth of comprehensive literature on early childhood education curricula, the details are worthwhile.

2.4.3. The guidelines provide guided and balanced mechanisms to deal with questions from the ground on several issues such as debates on home language, multilingual classrooms, inclusion, school readiness, material/ resource rich environment- whether 3 Rs or emphasis on holistic development, role of activity and play in early learning, assessment, balance in routine for young children, and so on.

2.4.4. Further, it specifically articulates the role and possible contribution of teachers, parents/care-givers are community.

2.4.5. The framework overtime may ensure a more systematic and informed approach to ECCE program across centres.

2.4.6. The idea that curriculum framework and curriculum details will be seem as bi directional continuous process that would keep refining with every cycle of curriculum execution could have cognised been emphasized.

### 3. Concern in Practice

- 3.1. It is three years since the NCF ECCE was outlined. It is however a hardly known document even in the ECCE sector.
- 3.2. The NCF ECCE in principle is a guiding document for all ECCE centres and preschools across the country. However, given that there are several kinds of pre schools and ECCE centres running in the country with no uniform norms or a regulatory body to govern these centres, it will be long before the vision and the principles laid in the NCF ECCE document may be realized.

### 4 Positives and Implications:

- 4.1. The public system pre schools – i.e. Anganwadi centers of the Integrated Child Development Services scheme have started implementing an adaptation of the curriculum framework based on the directives of the Ministry of Women and Child Development and NIPCCD.
- 4.2. Systematic efforts to bring awareness among the private sector and the non-government organizations to adopt and/or align with this national framework would be required.
- 4.3. Within the roll-out in ICDS, it is often seen that it is the syllabus,

and what to do is what reaches the Anganwadi teachers. In order to realize the objectives of early learning and development outlined in the framework, a holistic theoretical understanding based on which the principles of pedagogy and practice have emerged should be discussed and analysed with Anganwadi teachers as a part of their in-service capacity development programs, sector meetings and in other opportunities.

- 4.4. The core ideas of the document should get included in pre-service and in-service teacher development programs for early childhood and elementary school teacher.
- 4.5. Other stakeholders in the ecosystem of an ECCE centre such as the centre managers, parents, support staff, should also get oriented towards the expectations from a quality early childhood education program.

To conclude, there is a long way forward for this landmark document, the National ECCE curriculum framework 2014, to realize the vision of facilitating holistic development of every young child in our country. Several systematic efforts across levels will be required to ensure that quality early childhood care and education programs are available to children in our country.

### References:

- NCERT (2006). *Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Curriculum, Textbooks and Syllabus* (2005), NCERT, Delhi
- GOI (2014). *National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework* (2014). Ministry of Women and Child Development, New Delhi