

Conceptual Article

Modern Curricular Agenda for Tomorrow's ECCE

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Abstract

The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) is a major national initiative and a step forward towards achieving the goals of Universal Elementary Education (UEE). It has set forth the targets for itself to reduce the dropout rates and enhance the quality of learning of primary school children in a planned manner by making all-out efforts for and addressing issues related to the three major parameters of UEE that is universal enrolment, universal retention and enhancement of learning achievement level. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has been recognised as a crucial input for achieving the goals of UEE by providing necessary impetus to universal enrolment, retention and quality of learning at primary stage of education. This article explores the modern curricular system for future ECCE.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Universal Elementary Education (UEE), Curriculum Development, Universal Enrolment, Retention, Learning Achievement

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) poses a dilemma for curriculum designers. On the one hand, there is the need to guide the personnel in early childhood centres, especially when they have low certification and little training. A curriculum helps to ensure that staff cover important learning areas, adopt a common pedagogical approach and reach for a certain level of quality across age groups and regions of a country. A curriculum can also be a focus for further training. On the other hand, it is widely recognised that the aims of the ECEC curriculum must be broad, and contribute to the child's overall development as well as to later success in school. These aims will include, for example, health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; positive approaches to learning; communication

skills; cognition and general knowledge. These considerations suggest caution about designing a detailed cognitive curriculum, which staff should 'deliver' to compliant young children.

CURRICULAR AGENDA FOR ECCE

The curriculum is the sum total of all the experiences available to the child, and cannot be reduced to a syllabus. It has to be constructed to suit the child's requirements in different contexts, and should be in tune with the age, needs, and abilities of the child; it requires the full involvement of the teacher, both in building it and in transacting it in the classroom. It is equally important to reiterate that the curriculum should not be the drab, meaningless, and often cruel schedule that passes for preschool education today, according to which children are forced to do things most inappropriate for their age and needs.

The curricular framework may include then the following features:

- ❖ A statement of the principles and values that should guide early childhood centres
- ❖ A summary of programme standards that parents may expect in the early childhood centre e.g. child/staff ratios, educator qualifications, indoor and outdoor learning environments.
- ❖ Pedagogical guidelines outlining the processes through which children achieve the outcomes proposed, e.g. through experiential learning; open, play-based programming; involvement.
- ❖ Developmentally appropriate, activity based, and related to the child's needs, interests, and abilities, according to age;
- ❖ An integrated set of experiences to foster holistic growth and development in all domains such as health and well-being, and cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language development through an interlinked approach;
- ❖ Able to help the child to adjust to the routines of primary school as well as to the demands of more formal teaching.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

Plato's ideas that young children should be guided in state-run schools were as radical and unacceptable in his time as centuries later Gandhi's ideas about craft-based basic education were to his contemporaries. Western thinkers like Rousseau, Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, and

others have been pioneers in the movement of early childhood education. Their ideas have opened the way from sensorial and practical activities forming the curricular content. Their insistence on and insights into the importance of play, art, rhythm, rhyme, movement, and active participation led to the inclusion of these elements in classroom dynamics. The ECCE teacher must be equipped with an understanding of the following basic principles:

- ❖ Play as the basis for learning
- ❖ Art as the basis for education
- ❖ Recognition of the special features of children's thinking
- ❖ Blend of the textual (basic literacy and numeracy) and the cultural
- ❖ Mix of formal and informal interaction
- ❖ Experience of both familiarity and challenge in everyday routines
- ❖ Primacy of experience rather than expertise
- ❖ Developmentally appropriate practice and flexibility
- ❖ Use of local materials, arts, and knowledge
- ❖ Integration of health and well-being based on healthy habits

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN AT DIFFERENT AGES

Infants and toddlers (0-2+): Infants and toddlers learn by experiencing the environment through their senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling), by physically moving around, and by being in the midst of socially responsive adults. Infants who are not mobile also absorb and organize a great deal of information about the world around them, and benefit from caregivers who carry them around and show them interesting events and people. Mobile infants and toddlers increasingly use toys, language, and other learning materials in their play.

3 to 5-year-olds: Three-year-olds love to talk and listen but they also need activity and movement, with major emphasis on large-muscle activity.

They enjoy dramatic play, wheel toys and climbers, puzzles and blocks, and opportunities to talk and listen to simple stories. Four-year-olds enjoy a greater variety of experiences and more small-motor activities such as using a pair of scissors, doing art work, playing with manipulative objects like puzzles, and cooking. They are more able to concentrate and remember as well as recognize objects by shape, colour, or size.

6 to 8-year-olds: Six-year-olds are active and demonstrate considerable verbal ability, and develop concepts and problem solving skills based on these experiences. Children are able to understand rules and play elaborate games with rules. Competitive and team games can come only after this stage has been reached. Most 6-year-olds and many 7- and 8-year-olds may be more mature mentally than physically. Therefore, hands-on activity and experimentation are more appropriate for this age group than fatiguing mechanical seatwork.

CURRICULUM FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS (02+)

ECCE settings for the very young usually need to be colorful and rich in manipulative objects or rocking toys that appeal to infants and toddlers, with careful supervision and intervention when required. Warm and responsive adults provide trust and support, creating dependable adult child relationships. Children learn to relate to others through rich sensorial activities, which provide the base for concept formation. Infants and toddlers learn through their own experience of trial and error, repetition, imitation, and identification. All infants are unique, and their needs and states vary from moment to moment. Adults must respond to infants' changing signals with sensitivity. Continuity and consistency in care giving are vital. The schedules of adults must adapt to the rhythms of babies' needs. Holding and touching are determined by babies' preferences. Within the home, the mother massages the baby, sings infant rhymes, and plays baby games that stimulate the child to distinguish the familiar face from the stranger's face, a skill mastered by the time the baby is 9 months old.

In the second year of life, the infant is able to recognize people and has the beginnings of language. Conversations, picture books, and objects are an essential part in the infant's environment. Outdoor play and being with other playmates fosters curiosity and willfulness. Two-year-olds need sand play, ball play, and many experiences of filling and pouring to allow for fine motor experiences.

CURRICULAR FRAME WORK FOR 3 5+ CHILDREN

The curriculum is the sum total of everything that happens in the classroom, and its contents can be drawn from the child's entire natural and social world. The strategies and methods to be followed by the teacher must be drawn from these basic principles, and should be adapted to the age of the child.

Play as the Basis for Learning: Play is natural, spontaneous, attractive, and enjoyable, an rewarding to children, and it is self-initiated. Children do not engage in play because of its

learning outcomes, yet it has been shown that play prompts growth and development in each domain of development. The term 'activity-based curriculum' is sometimes preferred to 'play-base, curriculum'. ECCE settings must cater to the requirements of supervised play with objects such as balls, sand boxes, swings, and rocking toys.

The Arts as a Basis for Education: The arts are integral to developing children's interest and have the propensity of naturally invoking a flow of children's responses. Aesthetic experience through music and art can easily be a part of the daily routine, for example, beginning the day with] songs, group movements, and physical exercise. Each day needs a song time, when children can repeat songs or rhymes. Creative drama is a particularly enabling experience that sharpens: children's gaze and observation.

Recognition of the Special Features of Children's thinking: They learn mathematics and science by pouring water into bottles, filling cups with sand, counting beads, and distributing plates for snacks. They enjoy sorting objects and arranging them in ascending or descending order. They learn about transformation in the environment by watching plants grow. The ECCE teacher needs to draw the children's attention to such acts through conversations.

Basic Literacy and Numeracy: One of the complaints voiced most often about a play-based curriculum is the absence of emphasis on the teaching of the Three Rs Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. It would be unfair to young minds at this stage to expect them to grapple with the abstract. Yet learning the vocabulary of quantity heavy light, less, few many and understanding the difference through activities would clarify pre-numeracy concepts.

Mix of Formal and Informal Interaction: Play interspersed with sit-down activities can help channel the restlessness, energy, and active disposition of young children.

A special time can be set aside when children are encouraged to talk about their personal preferences and choices or describe events that hold special meaning. Classrooms need to be organised so that they have both small group areas as well as 'big circle time' for the whole group to meet and interact.

Familiarity and Challenge in Everyday Rhythms: Children need to repeat not only songs and stories but also activities. During the early years, repetition is an essential form of learning. Therefore, the daily timetable should include certain basic activities every day. This gives children a sense of security. But the routines should not be rigid

Primacy of Experience, Not Expertise: The ECCE classroom must be lively and offer wide-ranging activities for children to be intellectually curious. Often the inputs tend to be guided by anxiety about what the children may not be able to accomplish. It is true that we cannot advise embroidery as a task, yet children can learn to see that fabrics have many textures and colors.

Use of Local Materials, Arts, and Knowledge: One of the easiest tasks for any ECCE teacher is to pick up leaves, pebbles, and flower petals from the ground and use them for sorting activities according to colour, shape, or size. Rangoli, kolam, and alpana are floor arts prevalent in different regions oldie, and children can be helped to use the materials creatively.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices: The practices need to cover all areas of development physical, social, emotional, and cognitive and to be linguistically rich in ways that are age related, individually appropriate, as well as contextually meaningful. Leaming activities must be concrete, real, and relevant to the lives of children as learning is an interactive process.

Health, Well-being, and Healthy Habits: The ECCE setting can orient children to life-skills learning such as keeping clean teeth and nails, washing behind the ears and between toe, as well as create awareness about indicators of poor health and avoidance of certain practices. Children in the 3 to Sage group are in the process of forming habits. Teaching children healthy habits is equipping them with attitudes of self-care and clean living, and encouraging them to develop self- monitoring competencies. The noon meal is an opportunity not only for providing nutrition but, more importantly, for sitting together, sharing food, and eating in a pleasant atmosphere.

CURRICULUM IN THE EARLY PRIMARY GRADES, 6-8+ CHILDREN

At this stage, children need help in getting gradually accustomed to the formal routines of the school as well as in learning the basics of literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy (understanding and applying mathematical concepts and gaining systematic knowledge of the social and natural environment). That is why it is suggested that the basic principles already outlined here should be applied to develop the curriculum for the first two years of primary school. This would help in the transition to a different stage of education; it has to be done by curriculum designers and teachers at the primary level.

The following guidelines are suggested:

Strategies for Classroom Interactions

- ❖ Provide concrete experiences, Teach through peer interaction.
- ❖ Encourage cooperative learning,
- ❖ Use the project method to initiate integrated learning.
- ❖ Work for the active involvement of children
- ❖ and Utilize drama for language teaching.

Teacher Child Relationships

- ❖ Allow children to express their feelings,
- ❖ Share their trials and triumphs.
- ❖ Be responsive and reach out to children.

TECHNOLOGICAL PRACTICES OF CHILDREN IN ECCE

In the context of information and communication, the Ministry of Education define 'technology' as including "systems that enable the collection, structuring, manipulation, retrieval, and communication of information in various forms". Over time, there has been a shift where describing ICT, from being any device that facilitates communication, to a focus on electronic devices. This seems to be a common understanding of information and communication technology from recent literature, which regards ICT as electronic tools including computers, the Internet, faxes, phones, televisions, video, CD and DVD players.

Old understandings are being replaced by new in the literature, as popular perceptions change, and ICT becomes more commonplace in ECE.

The introduction of ICT into ECE has occurred with incredible pace. Without "guidance, examples, and support for their own professional learning, early childhood teachers and centres have made their own decisions about the nature and extent of ICT use in children's learning". The integration of ICT into children's experiences to enhance their learning, and introduces ICT as a resource to support practice. As ICT continues to be more established in ECCE, there will be an increasing need for research to identify pedagogical and integration issues in the India ECE context. There will be a need to more fully explore teacher constructs of the place of ICT in ECE, including the place of ICT in technology education. The emergence of a new term, which describes the pedagogical use of ICT to enhance teaching and learning,

is timely. In the latest Ministry of Education documents, the term 'e-Learning'; 'learning and teaching that is facilitated by or supported through the smart use of information and communication technologies' is being used. The adoption of this term in ECE could see the focus shift from the technologies, back to the teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

As one of the newest curriculum subjects, technology education has developed considerably in the past ten years. At the same time innovations in ICT have blurred the lines between teaching and learning with, use of, and around ICT in technology education. There have been inevitable confusions around the terminology, in part because of the newness of these disciplines, and in part because the advent of ICTs has facilitated communication to the extent that we have access to information from around the world. What we can be sure of is that our understandings today will tomorrow be as obsolete. Ultimately, even the best curriculum can be transacted only by a trained and sensitive teacher. To make a success story of ECCE from Oto 8 years, a new type of teacher is required, one who is professionally trained and specifically sensitized to the perspectives of child development. The professional preparation of teachers for this stage, hitherto unplanned and uncared for, calls for thoughtful planning of training sequences relevant to the developmental needs of early childhood.

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