IMPLEMENTATION OF ECCE IN J&K: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES

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Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is gaining importance globally for its role in laying a strong foundation for the holistic development of a young child.Early childhood development has been included as a specific target in the context of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Target 4.2 of the SDG aims to ensure that all girls and boys including those belonging to disadvantaged groups and with disability, health conditions have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030 so that they are ready for primary education.

Research shows that children develop holistically in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings which are characterised by high quality interactions and relationships. This attention to quality has generated continued interest in how to most effectively achieve and sustain quality.In this context, role of school leadership becomes all the more important. While the evidence about ECCE leadership is still limited, there is a growing interest in gaining a better understanding about how ECCE leadership can positively impact quality. Present module will help us build an understanding on the concept and importance of ECCE and also the crucial role school leadership can play in ensuring sustainable quality in ECCE practices in schools.

Learning objectives

At the end of this module, you will be able to-

1. Understand the need and importance of ECCE during foundational years of school education.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the different policies and programs in ECCE.
3. Reflect on the best practices in ECCE through some case studies from field.
4. Deliberate on the role of school leaders in strengthening ECCE.
5. Deliberate on the strategies required to create a positive organisational climate for ensuring quality ECCE in schools.
6. Build up school-community partnerships for effective implementation of ECCE in schools

(I)	**Early childhood Care and Education-Concept and Importance**

Early Childhood refers to the first six years of a child's life with well-defined sub stages having age-specific needs. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) stage, also known as the preschool stage / pre-primary school stage, is the period between ages 3 - 6 years when a child requires a centre or school-based pre-primary education programme.

ECCE has two major objectives:

(i) To promote all round development of children in terms of physical, socio-emotional, creative and aesthetic, language and cognitive development, through a play based, age/developmentally appropriate curriculum and practices.

(ii) To enable a smooth transition of children from preschool to primary schools by ensuring school readiness through some specific kinds of play based, cognitive and language related activities and experiences.

School readiness, one of the objectives of ECCE, is thought to have three major components;

(1) Ready children, focusing on children's learning and development.

(2) Ready schools, focusing on the school environment along with practices that foster and support a smooth transition for children into primary school and advance and promote the learning of all children.

(3) Ready families, focusing on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development and transition to school.

All three dimensions are important and must work in tandem, because school readiness is a time of transition that requires the interface between individuals, families and systems. (UNICEF. 2012)

Thus, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) encompass the inseparable elements of care, health, nutrition, play and early learning within a protective and enabling environment.

Access to ECCE

In India center-based ECCE for children, ranging in age from 3 to 6 years, is provided by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private for-profit institutions. In government it is mainly provided through Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), centres commonly known as Anganwadis. Further, Lower Kindergarten (LKG) and Upper Kindergarten (UKG) classes exist in some government, aided or private primary schools. A variety of terms is used to denote these programs, like Balwadis, Crèches, Playschools, Nurseries, and Preschools.

Why is Early Childhood Education Important?

Research from around the world highlights the importance of early childhood care and education, and suggests that high-quality early childhood care and education has the highest long-term returns in terms of improved human development. How well children do in school, depends on how well they start.

Research evidence from neuroscience and cognitive sciences demonstrates that "the learning process for a child commences immediately at birth and over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development

occurs prior to the age of 6, thus indicating the critical importance of developmentally appropriate care and stimulation of the brain as a sound foundation for life."

Figure 1. illustrates that several critical and sensitive periods for cognitive, physical, emotional and psychosocial development are located up to the ages of six to eight and not receiving adequate stimuli during this period reduces the chances of the brain reaching its full potential, often irreversibly (Kaul and Sankar, 2009).

FIGURE: 1

CRITICAL PERIODS FOR SOME ASPECTS
OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTION
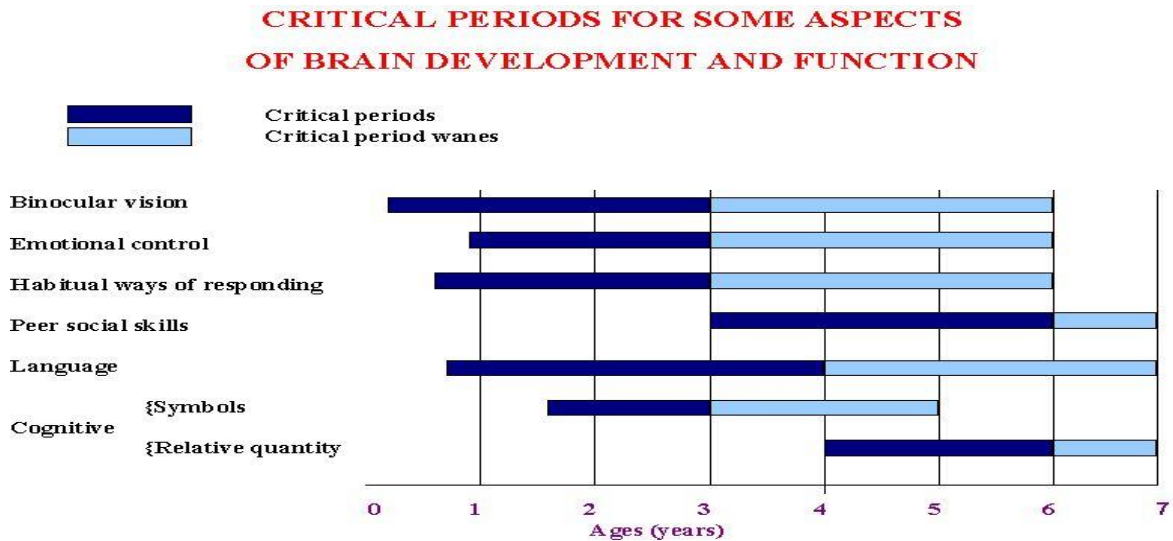
Source: Eliot, L. (1999). What's going on in there? How the brain and mind develop in the first five year of life. London: Penguin

Several other studies point to the lifelong consequences of early child development. A study done with 30,000 children by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) title "The impact of pre-school education on retention in primary grades", (1992), illustrates the direct correlation between exposure to pre-school education and retention rates, attendance rates, and most significantly, learning outcomes in primary school and beyond. Studies around the world also make the link between quality early education and its long-term bearing on higher income and home ownership rates and lower rates of unemployment and crime.

Three vital reasons for making universal pre-primary education a global priority

Quality pre-primary education sets a strong foundation for learning.

■ Children who attend a quality preschool programme start primary school with a solid foundation for learning – stronger social skills, larger vocabularies, better number sense and curiosity to learn more.

■ When children attend pre-primary education, they are more likely to stay in school and to attain minimum reading and mathematics competencies in primary education and beyond.

■ Pre-primary education helps children develop the resilience to cope with traumatic and stressful situations, such as conflict and other emergencies.

Universal pre-primary education helps make education systems more effective and efficient.

■ Children who have attended pre-primary education are more likely to enter school on time, less likely to drop out or repeat grades, and more likely to complete primary and secondary school.

■ Education systems are spared the 'catch-up' efforts and resources needed to address inefficiencies such as over-enrolment in the early grades, repetition and low completion rates.

■ Pre-primary education ultimately helps each country meet its goals for primary, secondary and higher education.

Equitable pre-primary education is an effective strategy for promoting economic growth.

■ Quality pre-primary education narrows early achievement gaps for children from disadvantaged households and places them on a more equal footing with their well-off peers.

■ When children attend pre-primary education, their caregivers have the opportunity to participate in the workforce and increase their earnings, facilitating the upward mobility of two generations.

■ Pre-primary education builds skills that will be needed in the job market, including collaboration, self-control, critical thinking and motivation – the skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens.

Source: https://www.unicef.org/reports/a-world-ready-to-learn-2019

Reflective Questions

1. Why do you think pre-school education is smart investment?

Activity: https://youtu.be/0GPBUPua7wk

Divide the participants in two groups. Both the groups are given the task of watching the video given in the link and share their understanding on—what is Early childhood Education and what it is not. Let both the groups reflect and write their answers.

(II) Early childhood Care and Education-Policy and Practice with special focus on J&K.

Many national level policy documents have reiterated the importance of ECCE as a positive contribution in overall development of a child. Followingare the key documents deserving particular mention in this regard;

- "**The National Curriculum Framework – 2005,** describes the first six years of life as critical since the rate of development in these years is more rapid than at any other stage of development. And Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) makes a positive contribution to children's long-term development and learning by facilitating an enabling and stimulating environment in these foundation stages of lifelong learning.
- **The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986** states that "Early Childhood Care and Education is a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development as a feeder and support programme for primary education and also as a support service for working women". (NPE, 1986, POA, 1992).
- In 2013, the Government of India adopted the **National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy** in recognition of the importance of investing in early childhood development – including early childhood education (ECE) -- and its impact on lifelong development and learning and breaking the intergenerational cycle of inequity and disadvantage. This policy is accompanied by a National ECCE Curriculum Framework and Quality Standards.
- **National Education Policy 2020** (MHRD-2020) recognizes the fact that over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6, indicating the critical

importance of appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years in order to ensure healthy brain development and growth, therefore strong investment in ECCE has the potential to give all young children such access, enabling them to participate and flourish in the educational system throughout their lives. As per NEP 2020, universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready.The foundation stage as envisaged by NEP 2020will cover children from 3 to 8 years of age. This includes the ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) or pre-primary sub stage in upward continuity and in conjunction with grades 1 and 2. Earlier this preschool stage of 3 to 6 years was delinked from grades 1and 2.

The NEP 2020 recommends four models for implementation of quality ECCE, these are anganwadi centres in communities; anganwadi centres located within school premises, pre-primary sections in schools and standalone pre-schools.

Introduction of ECCE in the government schools of J&K

With education and childcare coming under the state's domain, there has been uneven progress in the implementation of ECCE policies across states. Some states have even come up with their own state-specific ECCE policies, whereas others still rely on centre led initiatives. In some states, we observe tangible merger of Anganwadi centres with government run schools and some states have come up with corrective reforms to control the growth of un-aided, un-recognized privately run pre-schools.

In J&K, though we are yet to see some ECCE policy in place, still lot of progress has been made with respect to access and participation to ECCE in government run schools.

Pre-primary classes were introduced in government schools as a part of strategy to tackle depleting enrolment in primary classes and also to address the issue of low learning levels among kids entering primary schools without school readiness. Launched as Model Kindergarten project, some select schools in each district of UT were given financial support to establish well-furnished Kindergarten sections. Since then, the number of such pre-primary sections funded either through SmagaraShiksha or Capex budget are increasing and some of these schools are performing excellently.

Success story 1.
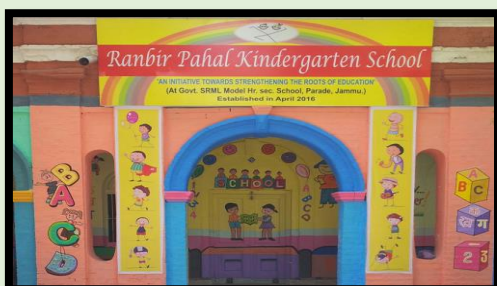
Ranbir Pahal Kindergarten- a pre-primary section at Govt. SRML HSS, Parade, Jammu is a success story in the field of ECCE which has been able to create a mark for itself.

Established in 2016, this pre-primary school has good enrolment and is furnished with infrastructure at par with best available in private sector. Every year this school attracts good enrolment and has been successful in reinforcing the faith of the parents in quality of education being provided at government schools. Owing to its contribution made in the field of ECCE, this school has now been upgraded to Divisional Resource Centre for Pre-primary Education by Directorate of School Education, Jammu. And it now actively functions as an academic and administrative unit of Directorate for looking into supervision, capacity building and resource support in Pre-primary education in the division.

Success story 2.

GMS New Colony Pulwama, Kashmir is a successful model in ECCE which was established as model Kindergarten section in 2018. The school witnessed an overwhelming success in the first year itself when it could secure an enrolment of 200 pre-primary students. Furnished with age appropriate, child friendly infrastructure, this school has some attractive features which are earning appreciation from one and all. The school building has Smart room having projector, separate Activity room- divided into learning areas. Music room, Comfort zone room particularly for 3 years old where they can take rest, relax and do some recreation activities. All these child friendly initiatives have improved the enrolment scenario in school and also the impact on quality of teaching-learning is quite visible.

However, such success stories are limited and still a lot needs to be done in establishing sound base of ECCE in the government schools, which are far behind private preschools in terms of infrastructure and enrolment.

Table 1. Illustrates the status of enrolment of children in the age group of 4 to 8 years in J&K. Still considerable number of children prefer private preschools over government pre-primary institutions.

Table 1: % Children age 4-8 enrolled in different types of pre-schools and schools 2019

Age	Pre-school			School			Not enrolled	Total
	Angan-wadi	Govt pre-primary	Pvt LKG/ UKG	Govt	Pvt	Other		
Age 4	44.2	5.6	36.7	2.9	1.9	0.0	8.7	100
Age 5	26.2	5.3	40.6	16.7	7.2	0.0	4.0	100
Age 6	5.8	4.4	23.2	40.7	23.6	0.1	2.1	100
Age 7	1.0	1.0	8.3	54.3	34.5	0.1	0.8	100
Age 8	0.4	0.5	2.8	59.0	36.7	0.1	0.6	100

'Govt pre-primary' refers to pre-primary classes in government schools.
'Other' includes children going to any other kind of school.
'Not enrolled' includes children who never enrolled or have dropped out.

Source: ASER,2019

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What according to you are the main hurdles in introducing ECCE in the government schools?
2. What can be the ways to improve current status of ECCE in schools?

(III)	**Role of school leaders in leading initiatives in ECCE.**

Research across sectors finds that leadership is one of the single most important drivers of organisational performance, quality improvement and innovation. This suggests that effective leadership is important and necessary in ECCE settings.

School leaders may play a role in fostering positive workplace relationships, a culture of learning and improvement, shared decision-making, and staff professional development. These workplace supports may enable ECCE staff to excel in their work, translating into high levels of process quality. In this way, leadership may exert an indirect influence on process quality by creating positive and supportive working conditions for staff. Leadership might also have a direct effect on the quality of organisational practices by encouraging teacher leadership; a term that refers to ECCE staff who engage in behaviours and actions that influence change and improvement.(OECD.2019)

Defining the Leadership Role and Function
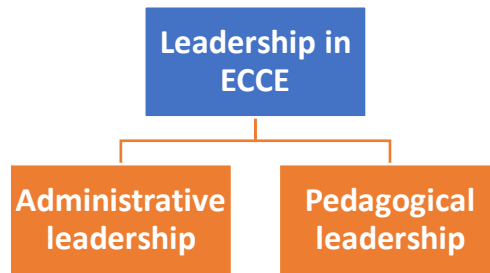
Administrative leadership and pedagogical leadership are the most commonly identified functions of ECCE leadership. These two functions (administrative and pedagogical) encompass a broad range of leadership skills and competencies, from knowledge of teaching and learning to human resources and financial management.

Administrative leadership refers to the management of operations including human resources and finance; strategic functions such as planning, goal setting and quality improvement; and may also include collaborating with community partners and systems.

Pedagogical leadership is the leadership needed to support teaching and learning, and is sometimes referred to as instructional leadership. It includes supporting staff professional development and learning, creating trusting relationships with and among staff, facilitating peer learning, promoting the implementation of curriculum and assessment, and structuring the work environment to support all of these

Together, these can result in high levels of process quality. In addition, when staff leadership is supported, staff can also positively impact workplace climate and culture of continuous improvement.

Given the critical nature of learning in the first five years of a child's life, it is imperative that school leaders are actively involved in their communities' early learning programs before students arrive for kindergarten or first grade.

As per 'Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities' document co-created by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Collaborative Communications Group, which are an independent professional association based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA, following are the standards which must essentially be achieved by the school heads for strengthening ECCE in schools.

Standard One: Embrace Early Childhood Learning

Effective School leaders embrace high-quality early childhood programs, principles and practices as the foundation for education throughout the school community

Standard Two: Engage Families and Communities:

Effective School leaders work with families and community organizations to support children at home, in the community and in kindergarten programs.

- Visiting children's homes before the beginning of the school year to meet the children and families.
- Creating opportunities for families to visit the pre-primary classroom before school begins.
- Establishing and maintaining ongoing communication with all families.
- Reporting to parents on children's experiences on a regular basis.
- Providing early education experiences that are informed by young children's cultural and community experience
- Acting as a bridge between schools and community-based supports for young children and their families

- Build coalitions with community organizations to strengthen learning for children

Standard Three: Promote Appropriate Learning

Effective School leaders provide appropriate learning environments for young children.

• that are developmentally and age appropriate and address individual ways of learning.

• that develop children's social skills.

• that provide facilities and learning opportunities to promote children's health and safety.

Standard Four: Ensure High-Quality Teaching

Effective School leaders ensure high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children's learning and development.

Standard Five: Use Multiple Assessments

Effective School leaders use multiple assessments to create experiences that strengthen student learning. They:

• Support teachers in using observation, records and portfolios of student work to guide students' growth.

• Use data from assessments to identify learning barriers, design strategies to overcome them, plan new learning experiences and initiate discussions across grade levels

• Share information about program effectiveness between school systems and other providers • Educate parents and report to them about their children's development and individual progress

Standard Six: Advocate for High-Quality, Universal Early Childhood Education

Effective School leaders advocate for universal opportunity for children to attend high-quality early childhood education programs

School leaders are the community leaders per se, who in their communities can play a pivotal role in making the case for expanding high-quality ECCE programs. As leaders in education, they are well-positioned to speak publicly on behalf of children; they can carry the message about the need for high-quality ECCE programs as a central focus of their advocacy.

Energizer – Make a perfect square

The facilitator will take a rope of around 5 meters in length.

S/he will tie the ends of the rope, place it on the ground twisted in an odd shape. The facilitator will call out two teams of 6-7 participants, blindfold them, make them stand in a circle, and ask them to take five steps back.

Then ask them to approach the piece of the rope and create the shape of a square. The team that makes the most perfect square will be appreciated.

Activity 1

1. Reflect on the strategies of fostering strong school-community relationship.
2. How can a school leader improve on the role of pedagogical leadership?

Activity 2: Evaluation (Self-check Exercise). Fill up with appropriate answers.

1. **Preschool/Pre-primary education covers a period of _____years.**
2. ECCE has been included as specific target in SDG number_____.
3. National ECCE policy came into being in the year_____.
4. Administrative and _____ leadership are two important roles of a school leader.

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