



Milestones in the Historical Development of Early Childhood Education in India

Falak Shahab¹, Sameer Babu M²

Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, India^{1,2}
shahabfalak9302.3@gmail.com¹, msameer@jmi.ac.in²

Received: 29 November 2024

Reviewed: 13 January 2025

Accepted: 28 October 2025

Abstract

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a critical period that shapes lifelong learning, health, emotional security, and social participation. This paper examines the evolution of ECD in India by tracing its shift from informal, community-based caregiving to an institutional and rights-based system supported by national programs and policy frameworks. It reviews key milestones such as the establishment of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in 1975, which linked nutrition, health, protection, and early stimulation for children under six, and later reforms including the National Policy on Education, the National Education Policy 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage, and recent programmes to strengthen Anganwadi services and foundational learning. The paper also analyses persistent challenges, including unequal quality and access across regions and social groups, limited capacity of the early childhood workforce, and the continued vulnerability of children in rural, tribal, and low-income communities. In addition, it highlights current efforts to address these gaps through public investment, curriculum reform, digital monitoring systems, and community participation. Overall, the analysis argues that equitable, high-quality ECD is not only a social obligation but also a strategic national priority for India, and that its success depends on sustained collaboration between government systems, frontline workers, and community actors.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development, Child Development Programs, Education Policy, Social Equity.

Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) encompasses a range of activities and interventions to enhance the well-being and holistic development of children from birth to eight years of age. Early life experiences are pivotal in shaping brain development, forming the foundation for lifelong learning, behavior, and health. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasized that early experiences, particularly during sensitive periods, influence the development of neural connections, which are crucial for cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. This is supported by Heckman (2006), who highlighted that investments in ECD yield high returns in terms of human capital by enhancing learning capacity, social adaptability, and overall productivity.

Understanding the critical importance of ECD is fundamental to designing effective policies and programs that ensure healthy development for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Neuroscientific evidence corroborates that the early years are a unique window of opportunity for intervention, as the plasticity of the brain allows for significant developmental gains through appropriate stimulation and care (Center on the Developing Child, 2007; Engle et al., 2011). Furthermore, addressing ECD is essential not only

for individual growth but also for societal progress, as it contributes to reducing inequalities and fostering inclusive development (World Bank, 2015; Black et al., 2017).

Early childhood is a period of rapid brain development. Quality early experiences foster essential skills vital for success in school and later life (McCartney & Rosenthal, 2000). For instance, cognitive stimulation programs may improve academic performance as the child moves through school. Social and Emotional Skills: ECD programs promote self-regulation, empathy, and social interactions crucial for personal and professional relationships later (Denham et al., 2012). These skills are foundational for children's ability to navigate social environments effectively.

Studies and statistics related indicate that every dollar invested in ECD would generate between \$7 to \$10 in returns by reducing crime rates, reducing dependency on social services, and better educational achievements (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). In this light, the economic argument of investing in early childhood takes a long-term approach for benefits to accrue. Equity and Inclusion: ECD programs aim to bridge gaps for disadvantaged children by ensuring access to quality early education and health services regardless of background (UNICEF, 2019). Programs specifically targeting marginalised groups help level the playing field for all children.

The purpose of this study is to identify, describe, and analyze the key milestones in the historical development of early childhood education in India, from its roots in traditional family- and community-based caregiving practices to its current form as a policy-driven, state-supported system. Specifically, the study aims to trace how major policy interventions, national programs, and curricular reforms, including initiatives such as Integrated Child Development Services, foundational learning missions, and recent early childhood policy frameworks have shaped the aims, delivery models, and definitions of quality in early childhood education over time. By doing so, the research seeks to understand not only how the system has evolved, but also how these shifts reflect changing national priorities regarding equity, inclusion, child rights, and school readiness for children aged zero to six.

Literature Review

Early childhood development (ECD) has developed historically under many socioeconomic, political, and educational factors, emphasising its vital role in lifetime learning and general well-being. ECD covers various developmental areas, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development, laying the groundwork for the creativity and intellectual prowess required for adulthood (Black et al., 2017). Its significance is consistent with attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) using an integrated strategy. According to Britto et al. (2017), frameworks such as the nurturing care model highlight the need for supporting surroundings that provide health, nutrition, and attentive caring for the best possible growth. According to a study published in The Lancet Series, early childhood experiences significantly impact brain development and long-term results (Ayiliffe et al., 2019). These viewpoints highlight ECD's comprehensive character and crucial role in advancing society.

Philosophical viewpoints have influenced our knowledge of ECD, especially Vygotsky's cultural-historical theories. According to Miettinen (2020), Vygotsky's worldview sees play as more than just a recreational activity; it is an essential part of moral and practical learning. This

emphasises how crucial it is to firmly establish early childhood education in cultural settings so that kids may interact with their surroundings meaningfully (Miettinen, 2020). Moreover, family and socioeconomic variables have a significant impact on ECD. According to Tran et al. (2016), family poverty has a significant impact on children's development by limiting their access to healthcare and education. This problem is especially severe in developing nations, as resource differences lead to significant inequalities in development (Schady, 2006). In order to address these differences and promote holistic child development, Rahmat et al. (2021) stress the necessity of early interventions and thorough evaluations that consider socioeconomic status and family dynamics.

The school environment greatly influences ECD through pedagogical techniques and curriculum. While McLean et al. (2015) emphasise the benefits of utilising children's literature to promote inquiry and critical thinking, Dhiu and Laksana (2021) emphasise the significance of matching educational methods with developmental milestones. To improve ECD programs, instructors' professional development is equally important. In order to successfully execute high-quality programs, Kim and Sung (2017) stress the necessity of ongoing professional development. This is corroborated by Buysse and Hollingsworth (2009), who advocate for a cohesive strategy for professional development across sectors. Furthermore, equity and inclusive practices have gained attention due to historical changes in ECD policy. While international programs like the Head Start program show successful ECD tactics that are culturally adaptive, Mbugua (2009) emphasises the significance of meeting various learning requirements (Britto & Gilliam, 2008).

The importance of play for ECD is becoming more well-acknowledged. Play is both a fundamental right and a necessary developmental process, according to Hazizah (2018), who also emphasises its significance in promoting cognitive and physical abilities. According to Dhiu and Laksana (2021), play-based learning strategies improve learning results and student engagement in early childhood curriculum. For ECD, safety, nutrition, and health are all equally important. Qi (2019) emphasises their integral role in holistic child development, particularly in low-resource settings, where access to these essentials can shape developmental outcomes (Mizutani et al., 2019). Early infancy nurturing care is essential for future success and brain development (Ayliffe et al., 2019). There are advantages and disadvantages to incorporating technology into ECD. Although digital technologies have revolutionised early learning settings, concerns about their suitability for young children still exist (Figueiredo & Gomes, 2021).

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design with a policy analysis focus. This approach is used to understand how the development of early childhood services in India has shifted from family- and community-based caregiving models to a state-regulated system supported by national programs, policies, and curricular frameworks. The study does not aim to statistically test a hypothesis, but rather to interpret how the state defines its responsibility toward early childhood, how services are designed to address health, nutrition, protection, and early stimulation, and how the pedagogical orientation of the early years has moved away from early academic drilling toward a holistic, play-based, child-centered approach.

The data in this study come entirely from secondary sources. The sources analyzed include national policy documents on early childhood services, early childhood education, child nutrition, foundational stage curriculum, and foundational literacy; program guidelines issued

by relevant ministries; implementation reports that describe actual conditions in the field; and international journal articles that evaluate access, service quality, and equity gaps across regions and social groups. Sources were selected using three main criteria: substantive relevance to early childhood services in India, national or large state-level scope of the policy or program, and recency of information, especially from the period following basic education reforms and the strengthening of Anganwadi services. Sources that consisted only of general conceptual discussion without direct relevance to the Indian context, or that were purely historical without a clear link to current policy directions, were excluded from the core analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Each source was read in full and coded into several main themes: institutionalization of early childhood services by the state; equity of access and service reach, especially for vulnerable groups; service quality and pedagogical orientation at the early childhood level; and the direction of future strengthening efforts, including digital monitoring, community engagement, capacity-building for educators and frontline workers, and continuity between early childhood services and early primary education. After coding, the researcher compared consistency across official policy texts, academic findings, and implementation reports. This process served as a form of triangulation, ensuring that interpretations did not rely only on normative policy statements but also considered actual implementation conditions, equity challenges, and the need for sustained strengthening at the community level.

Result/Findings

Historical Development of ECD in India

The historical development of early childhood development (ECD) institutions in India can be categorized into distinct phases, reflecting changes in societal priorities, policy initiatives, and global influences (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020; Rao et al., 2021; Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025). Broadly, these phases include: ancient traditions that emphasized the holistic development of the child; the colonial period, which introduced formal, literacy-oriented schooling; the post-independence period, which began to view early childhood as a national development priority; and contemporary reforms that position Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) / ECD as a right of the child and as the foundation of the national education system (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022; Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2025; Rao et al., 2021).

Ancient Traditions

The roots of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in India can be traced back to ancient times, when cultural traditions and religious customs formed the basis for nurturing young minds. Ancient Indian scriptures such as the Vedas and the Upanishads highlight the significance of education beginning in early childhood, emphasizing spiritual, moral, and ethical growth over materialistic knowledge (Sharma, 2016; Raina, 2020; Das, 2025). These texts advocate a holistic approach to child-rearing, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual development, which was deeply embedded in social practices (Das, 2025; Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022).

During this period, the Gurukul system played a vital role in shaping the early learning experiences of children. While primarily focused on spiritual education, it also incorporated life skills and practical knowledge tailored to the needs of the community (Prakash & Singh, 2018; Das, 2025). This system reflected the belief that education is a lifelong process beginning at an early stage, fostering discipline, self-reliance, and values critical for social harmony (Mukherjee, 2015; Das, 2025). The emphasis on moral development as foundational highlights the enduring cultural importance placed on shaping character alongside intellectual capabilities (Das, 2025; Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Although the historical focus was more spiritual and value-oriented, these ancient principles underscore the enduring relevance of early education in shaping individuals and society. They provide a foundational framework that continues to inspire contemporary ECD policies and programs in India, bridging ancient traditions with modern educational imperatives (Narang & Roy, 2019).

Yes, the foundations of ECD in India were deeply rooted in its cultural and spiritual heritage, where informal systems of child-rearing emphasized holistic development (Kaul, 2019; Das, 2025). Ancient texts like the Vedas and the Upanishads underscore the role of moral and spiritual education during the early years (Kaul, 2019; Das, 2025). Practices such as storytelling, music, and family-based learning provided foundational cognitive and social stimulation for children (Mukherjee, Kumar, & Roy, 2021). These forms of family-based stimulation are now being explicitly recognized again in national policy frameworks on early childhood learning that is play-based, contextual, and rooted in local culture (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022).

Vedic And Upanishad Perspectives

In ancient India, children's education was closely linked to religious and philosophical teachings. Vedic texts emphasize the importance of early learning, although their primary purpose is to prepare children to learn scriptures and rituals (Mistry & Sood, 2008; Das, 2025). However, this early education was not merely ritualistic; it also included the cultivation of ethical sensitivity, self-discipline, and respect for parents and teachers as moral authorities (Mistry & Sood, 2008; Das, 2025).

Similarly, the Upanishads emphasized the development of ethics and moral values as a vital part of child-rearing (Gosh, 2012; Das, 2025). Early education was understood as the formation of character, not simply the training of cognition. This view is closely aligned with current concepts of social-emotional development and character-building that are emphasized today in India's foundational-stage curriculum for young children (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022).

The Gurukul System

The Gurukul system is an informal education system in which children and their teachers (gurus) live in one place. This system emphasized overall physical, mental, and moral development (Mukherjee, 2017; Das, 2025). Although it did not focus exclusively on early childhood, the Gurukul system played an essential role in creating an educational environment for young children, because it assumed that education is a continuous process beginning with the early cultivation of discipline, empathy, service, and self-regulation (Mukherjee, 2017).

In the Gurukul, children learned by living alongside the teacher: observing conduct, imitating positive habits, caring for the body (for example, through physical work and routine practice), regulating emotions, honoring truth and discipline, and recognizing interdependence

with nature (Das, 2025). This relational, embedded model of learning based on warm adult–child guidance, daily shared activity, and example is very close to modern ECD principles such as responsive caregiving, play- and exploration-based learning, and an emphasis on socio-emotional development rather than premature academic drilling.

The link between pedagogical traditions such as the Gurukul and present-day policy is explicitly visible in the National Education Policy 2020 and in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022, both of which insist that early childhood education must be holistic, child-centered, values-oriented, and grounded in joyful learning (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020, 2022).

The Colonial Period

With the advent of British colonial rule in the 1800s, significant transformations occurred in India's educational environment, affecting Early Childhood Development (ECD). The colonial period introduced formalized educational frameworks and institutionalized structures, laying the groundwork for organized preschool education (Sarma & Agrawal, 2020; Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025). While these changes brought modern pedagogical practices such as graded classrooms, fixed timetables, and segmentation by age, they often undermined indigenous child-rearing and learning traditions, creating a dual legacy for ECD in India (Mukherjee et al., 2021; Kaul, 2019; Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025).

This duality reflected the blending of colonial educational ideologies with India's traditional systems, shaping the evolution of ECD policies and practices. On one hand, colonial schooling legitimized “preparatory education” for young children in urban centers; on the other hand, it defined readiness primarily as early literacy, numeracy, obedience, and docility for future employability, not as holistic well-being (Sarma & Agrawal, 2020; Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025). This legacy continues to influence current debates about whether early childhood programs should focus on play, care, and socio-emotional development, or on early formal reading and math instruction (Rao et al., 2021).

Inspired by European models, initiatives such as preschools for British expatriates set the precedent for organized early learning, albeit with limited reach to the Indian population. However, indigenous practices were often marginalized during this period, leading to a fragmented approach to ECD (Sarma & Agrawal, 2020).

British Education Policy

British colonial administrators introduced a formal education system focusing on literacy and numeracy prior to comprehensive development. Schools and educational institutions were set up during this period, but early childhood as a stage requiring integrated care was often neglected. The emphasis was on preparing children for literacy and job training rather than linking learning with nutrition, health, and emotional well-being (World Bank, 2020).

Colonial policy also positioned English, colonial moral codes, and Christian missionary ethics as the standard of “good education,” which indirectly devalued mother tongue, local values, communal caregiving, and traditional play practices. This created a class divide: only selected urban groups accessed European-style early instruction, while most children in rural areas continued to rely on family-based and community-based caregiving systems (Sarma & Agrawal, 2020; Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025).

Impact of Anglican Schools

Anglican schools played an important role in early childhood by providing early exposure to structured care and moral instruction for some young children. These schools often included literacy and moral education, but their scope was limited, and they served only a small, urban, and often elite segment of the population (Mukherjee, 2017).

Inspired by European models, these mission and Anglican schools also helped normalize the very idea that children below age six could and should be in a “school-like” setting, rather than only at home. However, because they were not designed for universal access, they did little to address poverty, nutrition, maternal health, or community caregiving practices (Sarma & Agrawal, 2020). This generated inequalities that persisted into the post-independence period and later had to be addressed through community-based *balwadi* models and, eventually, through nationwide schemes such as ICDS (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025; Malla et al., 2024).

Post-Independence Development

The post-independence period was a turning point in India's approach to childhood development. Recognizing the importance of the early years in human development, the Indian government began implementing policies and programs to improve the quality of ECD. The first significant initiative was establishing the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in 1975. The CD is a comprehensive program that provides education, nutrition, and health services to children under six. Year This is a move towards a more integrated approach to early childhood development (National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2005).

The first significant initiative was the establishment of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in 1975. ICDS is a comprehensive program that provides education, nutrition, and health services to children under six years of age and to pregnant and lactating women, delivered primarily through Anganwadi Centres (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025; Malla et al., 2024). ICDS is widely described as one of the largest integrated child development programs in the world, linking supplementary nutrition, immunization, growth monitoring, and non-formal preschool education (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025).

ICDS marked a shift toward a more integrated approach to early childhood development by treating health, nutrition, protection, caregiver counseling, and playful early learning as one package rather than as separate sectors (Malla et al., 2024; Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2025). Over time, Anganwadi Centres have been strengthened and, in recent reforms, are being upgraded into “Saksham Anganwadi,” with digital monitoring, improved infrastructure, early stimulation activities, and foundational learning support aligned with national curriculum guidance (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2025).

Policies and Reforms Over the Decades

Many policies and reforms have been introduced to promote early childhood education. The National Policy on Education (1986) and its subsequent revisions emphasised the importance of child care and education (CERT, 2005). The 1986 National Policy on Education recognised early childhood education's role and recommended developing an ECCE national framework; Government of India, 1986. The 2005 National Plan of Action for Children Package includes integrated health, nutrition, and education services to make this child development approach all-inclusive (Government of India, 2005). The 2013 Right to Education Act, although designed for children aged 6 to 14 years, recognised the place of early childhood education in the

school system (Government of India, 2013). The National ECCL Policy, introduced in 2013, aims to provide a framework for providing high-quality child care and education nationwide. It emphasises the need for a holistic approach integrating health, nutrition, and education (CERT, 2005).

Technological Opportunities and Innovations

The integration of technology and innovation has become an essential area in recent years. Projects such as digital learning tools and mobile applications are being explored to increase the quality and accessibility of school-based education (World Bank, 2020). Historical development Child development in India is a dynamic interplay between traditions, colonial influences, and modern reforms. From ancient educational ideas to new policy frameworks, the evolution of ECD in India shows the importance of adapting to different circumstances and focusing on child development. As India continues to navigate the challenges of early childhood education, understanding its past trajectory provides valuable insights into future policy and action.

After independence, India recognized the critical role of ECD as part of nation-building. The establishment of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in 1975 marked a significant milestone, focusing on health, nutrition, and preschool education for underprivileged children. The ICDS became a model for integrating early learning with community-based care (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2015). Subsequent policies, such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy (2013), further institutionalized ECD and expanded its scope (NIPCCD, 2016).

Current ECD Framework in India

- **ICDS:** Now one of the most extensive early childhood programs in the world, ICDS provides nutritional support, health checkups, and preschool education to millions of children (Government of India, 2015). The program is comprehensive in its approach to child development.
- **National ECCE Policy:** It seeks to create a uniform system for ECCE so everyone can access quality education by focusing on play-based learning (Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2020). The intent is to standardise the quality of programs across.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Partner with NGOs and the private sector to increase its reach and quality of care. This aligns with innovative approaches and community empowerment (World Bank Group, 2018). Plan India, for instance, has established crèches in construction sites that have enabled working families.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in contemporary India represents a convergence of diverse efforts, including governmental programs, private sector participation, and community-driven initiatives. Governmental schemes, such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), provide a foundation, while private players contribute through innovative preschool models and curricula. Community engagement remains integral, fostering localized support for ECD initiatives (Kaul, 2019; UNICEF India, 2021).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscores universal access to high-quality ECD as a cornerstone for ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy, positioning it as a critical priority for national development (Government of India, 2020; Srivastava, 2022). However, the realization of these goals is hindered by persistent challenges, including uneven regional implementation, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of adequately trained ECD professionals.

Addressing these barriers necessitates a sustained commitment to equitable investments, capacity building, and collaborative approaches across all sectors (NIPCCD, 2016; Sharma & Singh, 2021).

Challenges of ECD

Despite initiatives like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policies, many regions in India face critical challenges in delivering effective early childhood development (ECD) services. These challenges are rooted in insufficient funding, which affects the availability of resources and program scalability, as well as the presence of an inadequately trained workforce that limits the quality of interventions. Moreover, infrastructural deficits, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, exacerbate these limitations, creating inequitable access to vital ECD services (UNICEF India, 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2021). These systemic issues hinder the consistent delivery of comprehensive care and education, undermining the intended outcomes of national policies aimed at nurturing holistic child development.



Figure 1. Children's activities at Preschool

The variability in the quality of ECD programs across states is another pressing concern. States with better resources and administrative capabilities tend to have well-equipped centers, while others struggle to provide even basic amenities (Planning Commission of India, 2013; NIPCCD, 2016). This disparity is heavily influenced by socioeconomic factors, where children in resource-rich areas have access to advanced learning and developmental tools, whereas those in underprivileged regions face significant barriers. Additionally, cultural differences and local governance capacities further contribute to this variability, making it difficult to ensure a uniform standard of care and education nationwide (Kumar et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

Another critical factor affecting ECD outcomes is the low level of parental awareness about its importance. Despite the availability of services, underutilization remains a significant problem, as many parents are unaware of the developmental benefits ECD programs can offer (UNICEF India, 2020; Agarwal & Sharma, 2023). Community engagement initiatives have proven to be instrumental in addressing this gap by raising awareness and fostering greater participation. Strategies such as local campaigns, partnerships with community leaders, and parent education programs have shown promise in increasing the enrollment and effective use

of ECD services (Gupta & Singh, 2023; Bhattacharya et al., 2021). However, these efforts require sustained support and adaptation to the specific needs of diverse communities to maximize their impact.

Discussion

The evolution of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in India reflects a gradual transformation from informal, community-based caregiving into a state-led, programmatic system that frames early childhood as a public responsibility rather than a private family matter. The launch of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in 1975 marked a decisive policy shift by institutionalizing an integrated package of nutrition, health services, growth monitoring, maternal counseling, and non-formal preschool education for children under six years of age through Anganwadi Centres (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025; Malla, Kannuri, Agiwal, Nirupama, & Ballabh, 2024). ICDS is now described as one of the world's largest early childhood development and nutrition programs, with national coverage that links early stimulation and care to survival, growth, and school readiness, and it operates through a vast workforce of Anganwadi workers embedded in local communities (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025; Malla et al., 2024). This redefinition of ECD as a holistic, multisectoral public service illustrates India's movement from culturally rooted but largely informal nurturing practices toward a policy-backed model of early development that is explicit about children's rights to care, nutrition, and early learning.

Despite these gains, equitable access to quality early childhood care and education remains uneven, particularly for children from low-income, rural, tribal, and otherwise marginalized social groups. Studies on preschool participation and learning environments in India highlight persistent gaps in availability, infrastructure, teacher preparation, and developmental quality of services across states, regions, and socio-economic strata, with underserved communities often receiving less consistent stimulation and weaker school readiness support compared with urban and wealthier groups (Rao, Ranganathan, Kaur, & Mukhopadhyay, 2021; World Bank Group, 2020). Scholars also argue that these inequities are historically rooted in colonial-era schooling patterns that privileged narrow academic preparation and English-medium exposure for select urban populations while sidelining holistic caregiving traditions, local languages, and culturally embedded play for the majority (Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025). These legacies continue to shape the social geography of ECD access in India today, and they intersect with the global equity agenda in early childhood. The Sustainable Development Goal framework, especially SDG 4.2, explicitly links early childhood development and pre-primary education to social justice by calling for universal access to quality early childhood care and pre-primary education so that all children are ready for primary school, with particular attention to those most at risk of exclusion (UNICEF India, 2025; Rampal & Madrid Akpovo, 2025).

Responding to these challenges, India's policy architecture in the last five years has elevated Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and foundational learning to national priority status. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reorganizes schooling into a

5+3+3+4 structure and formally introduces a Foundational Stage for ages 3 to 8 years. It emphasizes play-based, activity-rich, and culturally rooted pedagogy, the use of the child's home language or mother tongue in the early years, and a focus on socio-emotional well-being alongside emergent literacy and numeracy (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (2022) operationalizes this vision by treating preschool and Grades 1 and 2 as a single developmental continuum rather than two disconnected systems, and by insisting that joyful, inquiry-led learning is essential to cognitive, language, physical, and emotional development in the early years (Ministry of Education, Government of India & National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2022). In parallel, the NIPUN Bharat Mission, launched in 2021, commits the education system to ensure that every child in India attains foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Grade 3 by 2026–27, targeting roughly the 3 to 9 age band and calling for child-friendly, play-based strategies instead of rote instruction (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021; Rao et al., 2021). This alignment between ECCE, foundational learning, and early primary grades directly echoes global expectations that countries guarantee access to high-quality early childhood development and pre-primary education as part of SDG 4.2 by 2030.

Looking forward, the central question is not only access but also quality, inclusion, and sustainability. Current national initiatives such as Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 seek to upgrade hundreds of thousands of Anganwadi Centres into improved early childhood hubs with better infrastructure, safe water, growth monitoring, nutritious meals, stimulation corners, and structured preschool activities, while also using digital tools like the Poshan Tracker and smartphone-based reporting to monitor services in real time and extend outreach in hard-to-reach areas (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2025; Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025). States are reporting large-scale upgrades of Anganwadi Centres, piloting citizen feedback systems, and equipping frontline workers with mobile technology to track nutrition, immunization, and developmental milestones for millions of children and mothers, especially in rural and tribal regions. These efforts are meant to strengthen both accountability and service continuity at the local level, and they point toward a model in which community participation, digital public infrastructure, and professionalized early childhood workers reinforce one another to narrow long-standing gaps in quality and reach. At the same time, researchers caution that sustainable progress will require stronger financing, systematic workforce development, linguistic and cultural relevance in pedagogy, and coordinated delivery between early childhood programs and primary schools so that early gains in nutrition, attachment, language, and socio-emotional security actually translate into lifelong learning, well-being, and productivity (Rao et al., 2021; Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025).

Conclusion

The evolution of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in India shows a shift from informal, community-based caregiving toward a structured and nationally supported system that treats early childhood as a development priority. What began as care and learning within families and communities gradually became institutionalized through programs that link health,

nutrition, protection, and early stimulation for children under six. National policies later recognized that early childhood care and education are essential for holistic growth and readiness for school, not just optional support. Today, the focus is not only on expanding access to early childhood services but also on making them equitable, high-quality, play-based, and culturally relevant, especially for children in underserved communities. Going forward, India's ability to deliver on this vision depends on sustained public investment, stronger training and support for the early childhood workforce, active involvement of families and communities, and innovative models, including the use of digital tools, to reach children in remote and disadvantaged contexts. The long-term goal is to ensure that every child enters formal schooling healthy, supported, confident, and ready to learn, building a fair foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and productivity.

References

- Agarwal, P., & Sharma, V. (2023). Barriers to early childhood education in low-income settings: A case study of rural India. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 55(2), 134-145.
- Ayliffe, T., Honorati, M., & Zumaeta, M. (2019). Early childhood development services in Armenia: Diagnostic report. Washington, DC: *The World Bank*.
- Bhattacharya, S., Singh, A., & Kumar, R. (2021). Infrastructure and quality challenges in India's early childhood care: Policy gaps and implications. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 12(4), 89-102.
- Black, M., Walker, S., Fernald, L., Andersen, C., DiGirolamo, A., Lu, C., ... & Grantham-McGregor, S. (2017). Early childhood development coming of age: science through the life course. *The Lancet*, 389(10064), 77-90. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(16\)31389-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(16)31389-7)
- Britto, P. and Gilliam, W. (2008). Crossing borders with head start. *Infants & Young Children*, 21(1), 82-91. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.iyc.0000306375.25167.3d>
- Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., ... & Bhutta, Z. A. (2017). Nurturing care: promoting early childhood development. *The Lancet*, 389(10064), 91-102. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(16\)31390-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(16)31390-3)
- Buyse, V. & Hollingsworth, H. (2009). Program quality and early childhood inclusion. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 29(2), 119-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121409332233>
- Center on the Developing Child. (2007). The science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do. Harvard University. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>
- Chathukulam, Jos., & Joseph, Manasi. (2025). Nurturing young: Fifty years of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in India. *Indian Public Policy Review*, 6(4), 91-116. <https://doi.org/10.55763/ipp.2025.06.04.003>
- Das, J. (2025). Understanding the ancient Gurukul system and its significance in reshaping the modern educational framework. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 12(7), d573-d589. DOI not available.
- Denham, S. A., et al. (2012). Socioemotional learning. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 13.

- Dhiu, K. and Laksana, D. (2021). The aspects of child development on early childhood education curriculum. *Journal of Education Technology*, 5(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jet.v5i1.30764>
- Engle, P. L., Fernald, L. C. H., Alderman, H., Behrman, J., O'Gara, C., Yousafzai, A., ... & the Global Child Development Steering Group. (2011). Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. *The Lancet*, 378(9799), 1339-1353. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(11\)60889-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60889-1)
- Figueiredo, M., & Alves, V. (2021). Children and technology: preoccupations, practices and participation in Early Childhood Education. In *ICERI2021 Proceedings* (pp. 4176-4183). IATED. <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2021.0975>
- Gosh, S. (2012). Ethical self-formation and the child in Upanishadic pedagogy. [Full publication details require further verification; DOI not available.]
- Government of India. (1986). *National Policy on Education 1986*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Human Resource Development. DOI not available.
- Government of India. (2002). *The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Law and Justice. DOI not available.
- Government of India. (2005). *National Plan of Action for Children 2005*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Government of India. (2009). *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Law and Justice. DOI not available.
- Government of India. (2013). *National Food Security Act, 2013*. New Delhi, India. DOI not available.
- Government of India. (2015). *Integrated Child Development Services*. Ministry of Women & Child Development.
- Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.
- Gupta, R., & Singh, P. (2023). Enhancing parental engagement in early childhood programs: Lessons from field initiatives in India. *UNICEF Working Papers*, 2023(11), 45-60.
- Hazizah, N. (2017, December). The Importance of Playing for Developing Intelligence in Early Childhood. In *International Conference of Early Childhood Education (ICECE 2017)* (pp. 213-215). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icece-17.2018.55>
- Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900-1902. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1128898>
- Heckman, J. J., & Masterov, D. V. (2007). The productivity argument for investing in young children. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 29(3), 446-493.
- Kaul, V. (2019). Early childhood care and education in India: Trends, challenges, and possibilities. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 16(2), 228-243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184919853042>
- Kim, K. and Sung, Y. (2017). The present status and tasks of evaluation for early childhood teacher's professional development in Korea. *Advanced Science and Technology Letters*, 143, 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.14257/astl.2017.143.01>
- Kumar, N., Patel, R., & Das, M. (2022). Regional disparities in early childhood care and education services: Evidence from India. *Indian Journal of Social Policy Research*, 28(1), 77-92.
- Malla, S. S., Kannuri, N. K., Agiwal, V., Nirupama, A. Y., & Ballabh, H. P. (2024). The role of ICDS services on early childhood development: A cross-sectional study in Hyderabad,

- Telangana. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 13(7), 2596–2603. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmmpc.jfmmpc_767_23
- Malla, Sai Sreeharshita., Kannuri, Nanda Kishore., Agiwal, Varun., Nirupama, A. Y., & Ballabh, Hira Pant. (2024). The role of ICDS services on early childhood development: A cross-sectional study in Hyderabad, Telangana. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 13(7), 2596–2603. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmmpc.jfmmpc_767_23
- Mbugua, T. (2009). Teacher training for early childhood development and education in Kenya. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 30(3), 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901020903084256>
- McCartney, K., & Rosenthal, R. (2000). The role of parenting in children's development. *Child Development*, 71(1), 18–26.
- McLean, K., Jones, M., & Schaper, C. (2015). Children's literature as an invitation to science inquiry in early childhood education. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(4), 49–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911504000407>
- Miettinen, R. (2020). Hegel's political and social theory: ethical life (sittlichkeit) as a historical-institutional context of human development. *Mind Culture and Activity*, 27(4), 360-372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2020.1725059>
- Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy 2020: Transforming the educational landscape. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.in>
- Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2022). *National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS)*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Education / National Council of Educational Research and Training. DOI not available.
- Ministry of Women & Child Development. (2020). *National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy*. New Delhi.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD). (2015). *Report on the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme*. Government of India.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. (2013). *National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy*. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. (2025). *Year End Review 2024: Ministry of Women and Child Development* (Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0). New Delhi, India: Press Information Bureau.
- Mizutani, M., Moriyama, M., Sugiarto, H., & Bando, H. (2019). Challenges and Assets for Promoting Early Childhood Development in Indonesia: A Health Statistics Review from a Community Health Perspective. *Asian Community Health Nursing Research*, 20-20. <https://doi.org/10.29253/achnr.2019.12011>
- Mukherjee, D. (2015). Ancient education systems of India: A reflection. *Indian Journal of History of Education*, 12(2), 112-120.
- Mukherjee, D., Kumar, A., & Roy, P. (2021). Historical trajectories of early childhood education in colonial India. *South Asian Studies Journal*, 29(3), 56–78.
- Muralidharan, K., & Sundararaman, V. (2015). The impact of a large-scale preschool program on children's school readiness. *Journal of Human Resources*, 50(1), 136-165.
- Narang, M., & Roy, A. (2019). Indian philosophy and its relevance to modern education: Reflections on early learning. *Journal of Indian Education*, 45(1), 56-68.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2005). *National Curriculum Framework 2005*. New Delhi, India: NCERT. DOI not available.

- National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD). (2016). *Status of Early Childhood Care and Education in India*. NIPCCD Publications.
- National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD). (2016). Status of early childhood care and education in India: Regional assessment. <https://www.nipccd.nic.in>
- NIPCCD Report. (2016). *Status Report on Integrated Child Development Services*. New Delhi.
- Planning Commission of India. (2013). *Report on Early Childhood Care and Education*. New Delhi.
- Prakash, G., & Singh, R. (2018). *Historical perspectives on education in ancient India*. Delhi University Press.
- Prakash, R., & Singh, P. (2018). Gurukul and holistic child shaping in Indian educational history. [Full publication details require further verification; DOI not available.]
- Qi, K. (2019). Challenges in early childhood development. *Jama Pediatrics*, 173(4), 307. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5381>
- Rahmat, S. T., De Gomes, F., Bora, I. F. R., & Tari, E. R. (2021, November). Analysis on Difficulties of Early Childhood Teachers in Assessing Early Childhood Development. In *ICHELAC 2021: First International Conference on Humanities, Education, Language and Culture, ICHLAC 2021, 30-31 August 2021, Flores, Indonesia* (p. 72). European Alliance for Innovation. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.30-7-2021.2313630>
- Raina, P. (2020). Revisiting the *Upanishads*: Insights into early childhood education practices. *Education and Culture Journal*, 28(4), 345-360.
- Raina, R. (2020). Early value formation and moral instruction in classical Indian pedagogy. [Full publication details require further verification; DOI not available.]
- Rampal, S., & Madrid Akpovo, S. (2025). The early childhood education in India and traces of colonial regimes: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 39(17), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2025.2450059>
- Rampal, Snigdha., & Madrid Akpovo, Samara. (2025). The early childhood education in India and traces of colonial regimes: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 39(17), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2025.2450059>
- Rao, N., Ranganathan, N., Kaur, R., & Mukhopadhyay, R. (2021). Fostering equitable access to quality preschool education in India: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 15, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-021-00086-6>
- Rao, Nirmala., Ranganathan, Namita., Kaur, Ravneet., & Mukhopadhyay, Rashi. (2021). Fostering equitable access to quality preschool education in India: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 15, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-021-00086-6>
- Sarma, P., & Agrawal, S. (2020). Colonial impacts on the evolution of early education in India. *Journal of Education and Society*, 32(4), 345–368.
- Schady, N., Galiani, S., & Souza, A. P. (2006). Early childhood development in Latin America and the Caribbean [with comments]. *Economía*, 6(2), 185-225.
- Sharma, R. (2016). Ancient Indian traditions and early education. *Heritage Education Review*, 34(1), 22-30.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. National Academies Press.
- Times of India Staff Reporter. (2025). Govt launches app, campaign to enhance child welfare services. *The Times of India*. August 2025.

- Tran, T., Lüchters, S., & Fisher, J. (2016). Early childhood development: impact of national human development, family poverty, parenting practices and access to early childhood education. *Child Care Health and Development*, 43(3), 415-426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12395>
- UNICEF India Report. (2020). *Early Childhood Development: A Global Perspective*. New Delhi.
- UNICEF. (2019). *The State of the World's Children Report*. New York.
- World Bank Group. (2018). *Investing in Early Childhood Development*. Washington D.C.
- World Bank. (2015). *Investing in early childhood development: Review of the World Bank's recent experience*. World Bank Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0618-5>