

Evolution of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in Sri Lanka: Analysis of the state responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The notion of the early childhood as the period of most rapid human growth with the greatest sensitivity to environmental influences is a globally acclaimed concept. The government of Sri Lanka has made many and varied commendable contributions to promote quality access of Early Childhood Education Care & Development in Sri Lanka. However, the state contribution towards ECCD seems to be equivocal with the national education systems recognizing the child from primary school and above. Thus, preschools administration is more or less carried out as a small business or charity. Furthermore, a multiplicity of ECCD agencies, providing an uneven distribution of facilities for ECCD in Sri Lanka seems to be in need of rigorous supervision and monitoring. The government of Sri Lanka also seems reluctance in its responsibility of shouldering the ECCD, Sri Lanka in a meaningful manner. In this sense, universal, uniform and quality access to ECCD seems to be denied to preschool aged children. Hence, social, cognitive and emotional needs of the Sri Lankan preschool children do not seem to be addressed in an optimum manner during this significant, critical and sensitive period of this development. Thus, aim of the present paper is to review the state responsibility towards ECCD, Sri Lanka while providing suggestions/recommendations to increase it.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, Preschools, Policy, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

According to the Asia-Pacific end decade notes on education for all (UNESCO/ UNICEF, 2012), 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) refers to a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain, support and aid the holistic development of children, from birth to age 8 years' (UNESCO/ UNICEF, 2012; P, 01). ECCE is also considered a critical window of opportunity for optimizing young children's development through the combined impact of education, with other care and protection domains (Berk, 2010).

The quality reception of ECCE programs by young children is considered to be important determinants of school performance (Alderman, Behrman, Lavy, & Menon, 2001), lifetime productivity (Behrman, Hodinott, Maluccio, Soler-Hampejsek, Behrman, Martorell, 2008). Literature also convey that these aspects have strong associations with cognitive and psychosocial skills measured at young ages and educational attainment, earnings, and employment

outcomes (Boissiere, Knight, & Sabot, 1985; Behrman, Cheng, & Todd, 2004; Barnett, & Masse, 2007; Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke -Stewart, McCartney, Owen, et al, 2007) in later years. Thus, the significance of ECCE to in the lives of young children appears to be critical; requiring global as well as national concern.

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)

The early childhood activities carried out in Sri Lanka is referred to as Early Childhood Care & Development (ECCD) and spans from 0 to 5 years in contrast to its global referral of ECCE, spanning from 0 to 8 years (UNESCO/ UNICEF, 2012).

In spite of this difference in referral and outline of ECCD; the Sri Lanka as a country seems to be gradually awakening to its responsibility towards early years. Its past accomplishments towards ECCD include developing a national policy on ECCD (MoE, 2008), and establishing guidelines for child development centers (MCDWA, 2006). Sri Lankan is also in the process of introducing many and varied proactive measures to improve the quality of the ECCE to its

young children. In the recent past, it has defined, developed, and validated country-specific standards for different aspects of ECCE such as curricular advancement, teacher quality and training, program planning, evaluation/monitoring and advocacy (World Bank Group, 2014).

Shortcomings pertaining to ECCD, Sri Lanka

However, there are several limitations in its recognition and allocation of funds for ECCD such as failure to shoulder the administrative responsibility as well as allocate sufficient funds for ECCD. As a result, the government seemed to have denied the Sri Lankan children, universal access of ECCD as it does for its primary and secondary education. Thus, a huge proportion of Sri Lankan preschool children is reached by private (fee levying), and non-government ECCD organizations (WBG, 2014). While this promotes ECCD service provision being reached to a large number of Sri Lankan children, failures of the government from shouldering the total ECCD of Sri Lanka has created a damaging situation for its young children such as the absence of clear standards, and resource constraints in terms of quality as well as quantity. Further, this may also prevent the reach of quality reception of ECCD to Sri Lankan children, especially those from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. This practice has further allowed the individuals with vested interests to open and maintain preschools leading to detrimental incidents such as child abuse.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to draw on several sources of information in an effort to present a comprehensive and well-informed analysis of the state responsibility towards ECCD, Sri Lanka while critically exploring the nature, structures, and policies pertaining to it.

Historical development of Sri Lankan ECCD

ECCD Centers in Sri Lanka are also popularly known as Pre Schools, Infant Schools, and Children's Parks, Montessori... (MoE, 2008). The present paper would be using preschools and ECCD centers interchangeably to refer to institutes or establishments which provide simulative activities to Sri Lankan children in the age group of 3 to 5 years. According to the National Survey report of preschools in Sri Lanka (Wijetunge & Wickramarathna, 2003), organized preschool education

in Sri Lanka was initiated with a few urban preschools in the 1920s. In 1972, Sarvodaya A Non-Government Organization which carries out poverty eradication and psychosocial activities in almost all parts of Sri Lanka introduced preschool activities in urban as well as rural areas, including underprivileged children as one of its target population. Lanka Mahila Samithiya, another non-governmental organization also provided preschool services to the urban and rural low-income sector (Wijetunge et al., 2003). At present, a multitude of organizations such as government, non-governmental (NGOs), private and the religious sectors are responsible for managing a majority of the Sri Lankan preschools (Wijetunge et al., 2003; WBG. 2014).

Though the government of Sri Lanka has taken varied measures to ensure universal, quality access to school education for its children, it has not granted this recognition or privilege to its preschool aged children. As a result, preschools seem to be perceived as a downward extension of formal schooling in Sri Lanka. Hence, ECCD institutes or preschools function as what was, in reality, can be described as pre-primary educational units (Report on Early Childhood Care and Education, 1986). Thus, ECCD seems to be carried out more or less as a small business or charity. The multiplicity of ECCD agencies with an uneven distribution of resources seems to require supervision and monitoring (WBG, 2014). Moreover, ECCD service providers in Sri Lanka, in general, were reported as possessing limited or zero skills, inadequate training, and educational qualifications (Wijetunge et al., 2003; WBG, 2014). This seemed to be further aggravated by inadequate remuneration and prestige associated with this service provision (Wijetunge et al., 2003; WBG, 2014). Further, an absence of standard curricula, hands-on training, and mentoring by experienced practitioners (Wijetunge et al, 2003) has also been reported.

The government of Sri Lanka has not been enthusiastic or fervent about shouldering the total responsibility of ECCD. The national education system recognizes the child from the age of 6 years (MoE, 2013). As a result, critical needs of the young Sri Lankan children requiring to be addressed by the overall supervision and monitoring of the state seems to be neglected. Considering the fact that early childhood is a significant period of social, cognitive and emotional development

of young children critical to their overall, current as well as future development which impact their future growth and behaviors; this failure cannot be blithely viewed. Although several policy initiatives and national plans of action have repeatedly stressed the importance of ECCD, a comprehensive and well-structured policy and a specific action plan with a feasible macro-level framework which recognizes the significance of ECCD remains absent to date.

One of the earliest reports on Sri Lankan ECCD, the Report of the National Committee of Enquiry on the Young Child in 1986, seems to have recognized some of these limitations almost three decades back. It reports that lack of direction at the national level, and the absence of a single agency for coordination as one of the major problems of ECCD, Sri Lanka.

Even though this limitation seems to have been attempted to be addressed through the many and varied ECCD structures established by the Sri Lankan government, the absence of a single effective central coordinating body to coordinate the overall, total responsibility of the ECCD, Sri Lanka among public and non-public sectors remains more or less the same to date.

Evolution of ECCD in Sri Lanka: ECCD structures, policies, and the state responsibility

At present, the care and protection of the Sri Lankan preschool children come within the purview of the Ministry of Women & Child Affairs (Ministry of Women & Child Affairs, 2016). It is established as per the Gazette Extraordinary No. 1933 of 9th September 2015. The government departments and statutory institutions which oversee the care and protection of the Sri Lankan women and children come under this Ministry. They are Sri Lanka Women's Bureau, National Committee on Women, Department of Probation and Child Care Services, National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) and Children's Secretariat (MWCA, 2016). According to its website, it was formed with the intention of being sensitive to the needs of the Sri Lankan women and children with the aim of increasing their well-being (MWCA, 2016).

This seems to be a sensible and practical decision taken by the government of Sri Lanka in terms of expediency and administration since coordination of varied state

statutory bodies responsible for the care and protection of women and children are within one agency.

State structures responsible for ECCD, Sri Lanka

Government responsibility for ECCD seemed to have initiated with the formation of the Children's Secretariat in 1979 (Evans, 1996). In 1986 a report on ECCD was presented to the Parliament by the Children's Secretariat as a Sessional Paper (no 111), making the ECCD a priority (Evans, 1996). With this initiative, the Children's Secretariat of the Ministry of Women's Affairs was mandated to promote ECCD in the Sri Lankan milieu.

The Presidential Task Force set up for this purpose worked through 12 Technical committees and submitted the new proposal to the President in March 1997. Thus, more comprehensive and holistic approach to ECCD, Sri Lanka was established with the formation of General Education Reforms of 1997 (MoE, 2008). These education reforms for the first time recognized and addressed the ECCD as important aspects of education in Sri Lanka (MoE, 2008).

Sri Lanka had already initiated these education reforms when the "Dakar Frame Work for Action" was declared in 2000 (UNESCO, 2000) to promote the 'Education for All' (EFA) movement. The Dakar Framework recognized expanding and improving comprehensive ECCE as its first EFA goal, with special recognition for most vulnerable and disadvantaged children (UNESCO, 2000). Sri Lanka was among the 164 countries who pledged to achieve the six EFA goals. In 2001, a separate branch was established in the Ministry of Education for EFA activities (MoE, 2008).

In accordance with it, the National Plan of Action (NPA) was prepared by the Ministry of Health, Education, Water Supply, Labour, Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare from 2004 to 2008 (MoE, 2008). The main objective of the NPA was to create opportunities for Sri Lankan children, consistent with their evolving capacities. The NPA also aimed to provide an environment that is safe, where children learn and develop their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills. It also planned to provide and integrate interventions that benefit children, while ensuring consistency with the cultural values of Sri Lanka while

maintaining the fundamental freedoms of human beings (MoE, 2008).

The NPA lists three main objectives for ECCE, they are: To increase the reception of the early childhood education from 62% to 80% for the children in the age group of 3-5 years in Sri Lanka; ii. Improve the quality of preschool education through providing training to all preschool teachers; and iii. Create awareness pertaining to the needs of preschool children among concerned stake- holders such as mothers, and caregiver ... (MoE, 2008).

ECCD became a devolved subject in 1987 after the 13th amendment. Under these reforms, the Central Government, as well as the provincial councils, were endowed with the shared administrative responsibility of ECCD activities in Sri Lanka. Thus, the central government implements national policy guidelines (e.g. maintaining standards of the pre-schools/ child development centers in Sri Lanka) while the provincial council's shoulders the responsibility of regulating the respective pre-schools in their provinces. Accordingly, provincial statutes are endowed with the responsibility of empowering the provincial authorities to register all ECCD centers in their provinces. They are also responsible for maintaining standards of infrastructure and teacher quality (e.g. through teacher training and distribution of teaching and learning materials) (MoE, 2013). Thus, Provincial Education Ministries have taken initiatives at the provincial level to establish and strengthen provisional level ECCD divisions (MoE, 2008; WBG, 2014).

For instance, the Western Province Provincial Council has stipulated conditions for registration, maintaining minimum standards and administration of preschools. It also decides the minimum qualifications and training of preschool teachers (Pathirana, 2006). It has also made arrangements to appoint committees to oversee the administration and supervision of preschools in the Western Province under the guidance of the Western Province Education Secretary.

Analysis of Policies and Action Plans

In order to overcome the major impediments to improving the quality of ECCD, the Ministry of Social Welfare in 2003 prepared a national policy on children

(MoE, 2008). This policy recognizes ECCD as an important, integral and essential component of education within the learning milieu of Sri Lanka. It also incorporates the implementation of standards and guidelines for preschools and day care centers, to be monitored by the provincial councils together with national level coordination and monitoring. The guidelines were based on an island-wide survey of 985 preschools (Wijetunge et al., 2003).

In 2004, the Cabinet approved the National Policy on ECCD (WBG, 2014). However, there is an urgent need to get the National Policy on ECCD approved by the parliament which will allow Children's Secretariat in MWCA (2016) the responsibility to implement the policy. It is envisaged that this initiative would further empower the coordination committees at the Provincial, District, and Divisional levels while ensuring their smooth functioning (WBG, 2014).

This National Policy on ECCD (2004) focuses on Importance of the early years, ECCD experiences in Sri Lanka such as home-based ECCD, day care facilities, pre-school children with special needs and the role & responsibilities of key ECCD institutions in Sri Lanka (MoE, 2008). However, this policy does not address the needs of children in special categories such as street children, 'beggar children' or displaced children (MoE, 2008). Literature further points (Pathirana, 2015; World Bank Group, 2014) that there are gaps in this policy, in terms of clarity, accountability, administration monitoring, and quality assurance; even though the comprehensive nature of it requires commending. Among them, the major constraint appears to be the confusions on accountability due to the devolved responsibility of ECCD between the central government and provincial councils posing a profound challenge to its implementation (WBG, 2014). This confusion generates implementation issues such as role confusion, ineffective coordination and failure to acknowledge the dominant role played by the non-state sector in ECCD, Sri Lanka (WBG, 2014) creating a weak legal status for the policy.

Thus, even though the National Policy acknowledges the role of the non-public institutions in ECCD; it does not specifically provide a distinct regulatory framework for them (WBG, 2014). Considering the fact that a large

percentage of ECCD needs of the Sri Lankan children are met by the non-public sector (MCDWA,2010), the paper believes that a specific regulatory framework as well as clarity on the central coordinating and implementation structure of the ECCD, Sri Lanka is required to overcome this obstacle. Therefore, the paper recommends endowing a more specific framework for the national policy with these changes.

In 2006, Children's Secretariat introduced minimum standards for ECCD centers or Child Development Centers (CDC's) (i.e. as they are referred to in the report) in Sri Lanka (MCDWA, 2006). This document stipulates guidelines for ECCD centers. Even though MWCA (2016) website state that it is propagating proactive initiatives for future of the ECCD it does not clearly state how they intend to monitor the guidelines stipulated by its predecessor (MCDWA, 2006). Further, the listed implemented activities by MWCA (2016) include conducting food/ nutrition programs, development of day care and pre-schools, conducting standard training programs for preschool teachers, carrying out capacity building programs for field officers, implementation of the National Policy on ECCD, setting up model ECCD villages, Media Publicity, and Publications, and Introducing ECCD Standards. However, the majority of these activities appear to be rudimentary and mainly focused on the micro level with few meso and exo level ECCD interventions. Thus, MWCA (2016) seems to have neglected the responsibility required from a policy level state institution in charge of the national ECCD, by omitting macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) interventions.

Allocation of funds

Growing body of global literature portrays that Early Childhood Development (ECD) can be considered as the most cost effective form of human capital investment (Alderman & Vegas, 2011; Heckman, James, Jora Stixrud, & Sergio Urzua, 2005) compared with primary education and any subsequent schooling. Further, ECCE interventions are also reported to have a high benefit-cost ratio (Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman, & Elder, 2010; Nores, & Barnett. 2010; Nadeau et al. 2011) with preschools being viewed by the developmental economists as a steady mode of poverty alleviation. Literature also claims that failures to invest in early

years may also compromise development with modifiable biological and psychosocial risks encountered by children from birth to 5 years of age (Walker, Wachs, Gardner, Lozoff, Wasserman, Pollitt & Carter: the International Child Development Steering Group. (2007). Thus, based on this research evidence it can undoubtedly be argued that the funds allocated for ECCD, Sri Lanka would yield psychosocial as well as unimaginable economic benefits for the country. Unfortunately, in the Sri Lankan milieu; the majority of the ECCD programs seems to be privately financed. The government contribution and investment in ECCD, Sri Lanka seems to be almost negligible, impacting its quality provision (WBG, 2014).

According to World Bank, Group (2014), Sri Lanka's public investment in ECCD is insignificant with no clear trend in the budget allocation for ECCD. The report also conveys that the budget allocation for national ECCD amounts to be 19 million SLR (equivalent to 0.008% of the National Budget). Thus, Sri Lanka's public spending on ECCD is reported to be the lowest among middle and high-income countries (WBG, 2014). Usually, the average public expenditure on ECCE in a middle-income country (as a percentage of GDP) is .03% (WBG, 2014). However, Sri Lanka's spending on ECCD reports being much less than this figure.

Considering the long-term economic benefits associated with increased funding of ECCE as conveyed by global research (Engle, Fernald, & Alderman et al, 2011) the paper recommends the government of Sri Lanka to increase funds allocated for ECCD. This recommendation is also made with the view that the Sri Lankan government has pledged to gradually increase its education budget to 6% of GDP. The paper urges the ECCD stakeholder to lobby for additional .5 to 1% of the GDP for ECCD.

Thus, the paper agrees with the previous literature (WBG, 2014; Pathirana, 2015) which argues for the increased public investment in ECCD to improve the access and quality of the ECCD. It also urges the state ECCD providers to explore creative and innovative ways of directing funds gained from debt cancellation, tax levies and public-private partnerships (WBG, 2014).

II. CONCLUSION

Despite considerable advances in the provision of holistic ECCD services by the many and varied stakeholders, problems pertaining to ECCD, Sri Lanka seems to continue. These include issues pertaining to multi-sector coordination, inadequate funding, uneven, and quality access of ECCD to children from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Even though there have been several commendable national initiatives taken; these do not seem to contribute to a significant increase in the quality of the ECCD delivery of Sri Lanka.

Thus, economic constraints seem to be the biggest factor limiting the government contributions to the ECCD. This seems to restrict the immediate setting up of an effective and sophisticated structure for coordination of ECCD at the national level.

Even though Western and internationally developed frameworks are not implicitly transportable to the Sri Lankan milieu, the paper firmly believes that the ECCE initiatives taken by many countries belonging to the Western world are commendable (i.e. providing free or heavily subsidized ECCD to its young children). The paper is of the opinion that this is an aspect the state sector ECCD authorities require to consider. Thus, the present study reaffirms the recommendations of previous policy review reports and literature pertaining to universal quality access of ECCD to Sri Lankan children (Pathirana, 2015) with a substantial percentage of GDP reserved for its ECCD. Thus, the paper also argues for increased social and financial state responsibility towards ECCD, Sri Lanka when identifying culturally relevant, economically feasible strategies pertaining to ECCD service provisions.

III. REFERENCES

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