REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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This review details the complexity of the ECE sector. It highlights the contested nature of quality. It outlines various features that formulate the quality and management aspects of ECE. It reflects on the current researches and their outcomes in both Indian and Western contexts.

The Contested Nature of Quality: Emerging Criteria for Measuring Quality in ECE

Quality is an international buzzword, not only in early childhood services but also in connection with all types of products and services. Yet in its mantra-like repetition, the word is in danger of being rendered meaningless. It attracts widespread support—for who could not want "good quality?"—unless and until we have to say what we actually mean, at which point it becomes far more elusive (Moss and Pence, 1994: p. 1).

Ideas about quality in early learning vary depending on the values, beliefs, and cultural and social context, and the need of the individual or group making the judgment. A child's definition of quality may be a program where he or she feels accepted, emotionally comfortable, and finds the activities interesting and engaging, rather than boring or frustrating. Parents may view quality as a situation that safeguards their child's health and safety, where their child is happy, and a service that is conveniently located and affordable. Parents may also define high-quality centers as those that prepare their child for school by incorporating a range of visible and tangible "school readiness" activities. Parents cannot be considered a uniform group. Mothers may have different views as compared to the fathers' views; further, parents from different social classes or

ethnic groups may have different and even divergent ideas about the characteristics of quality.

Meanwhile, program staff and early childhood educators may define quality, in part, by the extent to which relationships among coworkers are supportive; whether the physical settings assist rather than impede doing the work well; and how well the values, philosophy, and approach of the program match those learned in college-level ECE training programs. For the community, be it geographic or of shared interests and causes, a quality program is likely to be one that reflects and supports the values, beliefs, needs, and aspirations of that community.

Quality is typically conceptualized as a feature of the environment and experiences that are presumed to be beneficial to the children's development and well-being. (Retas and Kwan, 200: 54). According to Farago (1994), quality should be seen from a holistic point of view where all aspects, processes, and structural terms are included (Anderson, 1999: 46). Hagekull and Bohlin (1995) concur that quality is a multidimensional construct (cited in Hayes, 2000) encompassing the physical environment, social policy, educational curriculum, staff training, child/ staff ration, group sizes, and interpersonal relations (Ochiltree, 1994; Scarr 1993).

Any understanding and interpretation of research on quality must recognize two critical features of quality.

1. Quality has both subjective and objective components. For instance, almost everyone may agree upon a general quality principle (such as "it is better to have more rather than fewer adults in the classroom"), but the minimal and optimal

standards (the exact adult-child ratio that is required) would be subject to extensive disagreement. Certain dimensions can be easily measured with high reliability (e.g., adult-child ratio, square feet of space per child, etc.), while some aspects are global (e.g., developmentally appropriate practices) and some are based on individuals beliefs about what is right for children (e.g., a warm climate that builds self-esteem).

2. Quality has both standards and an individual component. Some aspects of quality are recognized as appropriate for all children (e.g., a responsive caregiver), although these standards may require modifications or new standards may be warranted on the basis of the needs of individual children.

Quality has been described in many ways in early childhood literature. One way is to cluster significant dimensions of quality. Dunn (1993) defined distal quality as an aspect of program potential available for children (adult child ratio, group size, caregiver characteristics, etc.) whereas proximal quality reflects those dimensions of the program that was actually experienced by the children (e.g., interaction with caregiver and peers and co-curricular procedure).

Phillips and Howes (1987) differentiate four types of quality: contextual (e.g., the community and state ecology in which the program operates), global (e.g., broad-based measures of overall program quality), structural (e.g., staff-child ratio and space available), and dynamic or process-related (e.g., adult-child interaction, peer interaction).

In a paper on quality, Schweinhart (1995) outlined the following components of a quality program:

1. The program offers a validated child development curriculum.

2. The program uses a validated child development assessment strategy.

3. The number of young children per teacher is sufficiently low to enable staff to positively influence their development.

4. Staff members are trained on how to positively influence young children's development.

5. Staff members receive systematic in-service training and supervisory support to positively influence young children's development.

6. Families partner with the teachers to positively influence the young children's development.

7. The program meets child health and family needs.

In the United Kingdom, Pascal et al. (1996) listed 10 dimensions of quality, namely:

i) Aims and objectives

ii) Curriculum and learning experiences

iii) Learning and teaching style

iv) Planning assessment and record keeping

v) Ratio of trained staff

vi) Physical environment

vii) Relationship and interactions

viii) Equal opportunities

ix) Parental involvement and home liaison

x) Monitoring and evaluation.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed the following 10 standards for high-quality ECE.

i) Promote positive relationship for all children and adults.

ii) Implement a curriculum that fosters all areas of child development: cognitive, emotional, language, physical and social;

iii) Use developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches.

iv) Provide ongoing assessments of the children's program.

v) Provide the nutrition and health of the children and staff.

vi) Employ and support qualified staff.

vii) Establish and maintain collaborative relationships with families.

viii) Establish and maintain relationships and use the resources of the community.

ix) Provide a safe and healthy environment.

x) Implement strong program management policies that result in high-quality services.

Sultana (2009) identified seven components for quality dimensions in ECCE, namely, infrastructure, furnishing and physical setting, personal care and routine, physical learning aids, language and reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, and social development.

According to Cryer (1999), although there are several definitions of quality, all of them share some major tenets. There could be many dimensions of quality in the ECE program; it can be perceived as an extension of family function. From this perspective, the ECE program must provide a nurturing and safe environment. The second dimension is that quality should be defined in terms of benefits to the child. A quality program must promote a child's social, cognitive, and physical growth using developmentally appropriate practices. The third dimension in quality is that early childhood programs cannot be provided in isolation, but must be a part of broader range of services to children and families.

Further, Bush and Phillips (1996) have opined that:

> "The subcultures and plurality of values in societies often mean that no one definitive definition of quality exists. It is a relative concept that varies depending on one's perspective...Indeed, quality is both a dynamic and relative concept so that perceptions of quality changes as a variety of factors evolve."

Balageur et al. (1992) listed the following categories of quality indicators to help practitioners evolve their quality indicators: (i) accessibility and usage, (ii) environment, (iii) valuing diversity, (iv) learning activities, (v) assessment, (vi) relationships, (vii) cost benefits, (viii) parents' views, and (ix) ethos.

To conclude, unprecedented attention to young children has ushered in a new era of ECE. The following four clusters of challenges in ECE need to be addressed:

1. ***Structural challenges***: These are related to fragmented "non-system" of programs for preschool children and to disjointed early childhood and public education policies.

2. ***Conceptual challenge***: These are related to long-standing approaches to early childhood assessment, program evaluation, and program management.

3. ***Technical challenges***: These are related to the need for appropriate tools and methods for the increasingly diverse population of young children and varied types of programs.

4. ***Resources challenges***: These are related to the limitations and inequalities in funding for early childhood programs and infrastructure efforts.

This section has focused on establishing the context for the exploration of known factors and perceptions of quality in ECE centers. Here, key literature concerned with the ideas that shape and determine its form has also been presented. The next section will present our results of the literature survey with respect to ECE in the Indian context.

ECE: The Indian Scenario

The Constitution of India resolves to provide quality education to all and fulfill the educational needs of the diverse societies and cultures of the country. The government has chalked out different educational categories, but the ECE does not emerge in the picture. ECE was officially recognized in 1986 in the National Policy on Education. All official documents from then on mention that it should be play-based and pressure-free. However, the ground realties are considerably different.

Children in the age group of 0–6 years constitute 16% of the population. A report on the "Status of Children 2008" revealed that 32 million children in India do not have access to basic education. Of the 164 million children in the age group of 0–6 years, 60 million belong to the age group of 3–6 years. Of these, over 6 million are slum dwellers who seldom have access to basic services. Thirty-four million children in the age group of 3–6 years are covered by preschool initiatives, either through the ICDS or through private initiations, excluding approximately 26 million children, both in rural and urban areas, from any intervention.

The data presented here are in no way exhaustive but they serve to focus on certain issues. According to Saxena and Ravi (NAC, 2005), only 25% of rural children between 3 and 6 years attend *anganwadi* centers.

Number of children from 0–6 years of age	158 million
Number of *anganwadi* centers	6.73 lakhs
As against 14 lakh habitations	10.5 lakhs sanctioned
Number of children attending *anganwadi* centers	25% of children from the age group of 3–6 years

The number of beneficiaries as on March 3, 2006, for preschool under ICDS is provided in the table below:

States	***No. of beneficiaries***
Gujarat	1404500
Maharashtra	2705644
Rajasthan	1264447

The ASER 2006 report by Pratham provides the rural scenario. At the all-India level, enrollment in *anganwadis* or *balwadis* is 68.6% for 4-year olds. There are state-wide variations as well. In Maharashtra, more than 90% of 3- to 5-year-old children go to anganwadis. These figures are 78.10% and 45.83% in Gujarat and Rajasthan, respectively. Simultaneously, children in the age group of 3–6 years in rural India do not attend any ECCE program. These children constitute 10.97% of all children in the same age group in Gujarat, 25.42% in Rajasthan, and 64% in Maharashtra.

The critical appraisal notes that the public sector covers 22% of children in the age group of 0–6 years. There are no figures available for private schools; they are estimated to be as large as the public sector. Furthermore, there are no accurate figures of services provided by NGOs for ECE.

Broadly speaking, services for preschool children vary immensely in terms of quality in the absence of norms specifying quality indicators, any mechanism of regulation and accreditation of ECCE centres, and a nodal body to co-ordinate this (Rao and Sharma, 2002; NCERT, 2006).

Aspects of Quality and Management in ECE: The Indian Context

In summary, our education system essentially ignores the formative years. Nevertheless, researches are being conducted throughout the nation to identify the quality and management of ECE. Child research focuses on understanding the dimension of the "quality" construct and representing the diversity of the childcare setting.

Sultana (2009) conducted a study on seven infrastructural components to assess the quality in the nursery schools of Chennai Corporation. The seven components were as follows: furnishing and physical setting, personal care and routine, physical learning aids, language and reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, and social development. The study also revealed the teacher's role as the most positive influence in a child's social development; the rest of the components were underestimated and needed improvement.

Bhavya (2007) conducted research in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The quality of infrastructural facilities such as the classroom size and ventilation, drinking water and toilet facilities, teaching arrangement, play material, and playground required improvements from the lowest to the highest levels. Monitoring standards required improvement and teacher participation was of low adequacy. Similarly, the adequacy of the learning environment was also found to be low.

Chaudhary (2006) investigated the municipal corporation private pre-schools of Delhi and reported problems related to nursery school education in the field of coverage, budget allocation, academics, motivation, and accountability.

Sharma (2004) studied the ECE services in Hisar city, and the results revealed that the government- and NGO-run preschools were mostly run in dilapidated premises, lacking play space and facilities for indoor space. The preschool heads and teachers were unaware of NCERT's prescribed norms. The teachers were untrained or inappropriately trained for their jobs and received meager salaries. On the other hand, private enterprises that had taken up the initiative for preschool education in urban areas functioned as profit-making commercial bodies.

A study conducted by Datta (2001) on the quality of urban early childhood programs in Mumbai revealed that a mere 3.5% of ICDS centers in the city were of good quality, while most (45.8%) were of below average quality, and 24% of the centers were of poor quality.

Gupta (1992) conducted a field study of 18 pre-school centers in Delhi. The results indicated they were lacking in quality and were below the NCERT-prescribed standards

of preschool program. The teaching methods were repetitive and stereotypical. Parents' concerns of making their children learn the 3 R's exceeded their understanding of the need for informal learning. Datta (2001) pointed out the importance of the roles of the practitioner, government, researcher, parents, and the networking organization, to bring all these agents together, and to arrive at a consensus on what is acceptable as quality ECE programs and persuade each one to carry out their roles simultaneously.

Another set of studies examined the interaction of static variables such as group size, physical environment, and staff training. In a study conducted on preschools in Andhra Pradesh, Nagalakshmi (1991) aimed to study the effects of group size, space, and play equipment and staff-child ratios on the behavior of children. Through this analysis, the study arrived at an "ideal" requirement for preschools in Andhra Pradesh. The study recommended making provisions for adequate play equipment, improving staff–children ratio and group size.

Vasudevan (1999) carried out an evaluation study at the Department of Women and Child Development, GoI, which desired to have a comprehensive review of the ECCE scheme to enable the government to make a policy decision on the merits of continuation of the scheme during the 9th Five Year Plan. There were 183 voluntary organizations running 4,217 centers in nine states namely Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The infrastructure of ECCE in these centers consisted of single rooms in a semi-*pucca* or *kutcha* building. One serious shortcoming noticed was the non-availability of toilets in 355 (62%) centers, and 181 (47%) lacked a vessel to store drinking water. Majority of ECE centers were functional with only a bare minimum of facilities and teaching aids.

Shabnam (2003) undertook a comparative study of underprivileged children enrolled in CASP-PLAN and ICDS preschools in Delhi, and found a significant difference between the structure, organization, aims, and function between CASP-PLAN and ICDS preschools. The impact of preschool education on motor, cognitive, language, and social development was higher in CASP-PLAN preschools as compared to ICDS preschools.

Khosla (1991) evaluated the refresher course in preschool education for anganwadi workers. The study revealed that such training was beneficial to the workers both in terms of organizing activities for children as well as in involving the helpers and mothers in the program.

The study conducted by Swaminathan (2000) on the quality of ECE indicated that active learning in all domains is necessary for the development of children's competencies. Secondly, good teachers may nurture and stimulate children even in a negative climate, but their efforts may not promote learning competencies in children.

Phukan and Goswami (1980) surveyed 18 schools in Jorhat (Assam), and reported that the daily program in preschools ranged from 2–5 hours. The programs were heavily loaded with formal teaching such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and the children carried heavy school bags and received a lot of homework, both oral and written. Examinations were conducted in order to promote the children to higher classes.

Mohite (1992) conducted a study to understand the linkages between preschool and primary education in three districts of Gujarat—Kheda, Badli, and Panchmahal. The study indicated that effective ECE programs have implications on school enrollment.

The NCERT conducted a status study of ECE programs as an innovative activity under the SSA. The study focused on the utilization of financial provision under SSA in the states of Punjab and Tamil Nadu. Both the states felt that Rs. 15 lakh per annum was less and insufficient and suggested that more financial aid was required for proper implementation of the program. They also suggested that academic support in the form of training programs, seminars, and workshops from the NCERT were required in order to improve the quality of ECE programs.

The national evaluation of the ICDS by the national institute of public cooperation and child development (NIPCCD) (1997) shows that children with ICDS experiences had better nutritional status, better immunization coverage, and were present in larger numbers in school; further, more older children (5–11 years) who had previously experienced ICDS continued to remain in school.

Kaul (1998) revealed that while the NCERT did work to identify the minimum standards for preschool education, they were not being enforced in any way. Non-existence of indigenous meaning of preschool education in the Indian context is due to its evolutionary phase (Kaul, 1993).

Some key findings from other studies are listed below:

- Teaching children as sources of information by regurgitation while doing nothing with its use (Viruru, 2001).
- Contradictory value system of ECE providers in terms of what they preach and what they espouse (Pandey, 2003b).

- Delinking ECE with formal institutionalized modes of educational delivery system (Pandey, 2003a).

- Defluxion of organized primary schooling, irrespective of age-specific and contextually pedagogical considerations (Kaul, 2002).

- Customization for using mechanistic instructional strategies, leaving no room for accommodating new advances like scaffold of teaching, protagonist view of child, symbolization of child as a researcher and scientist, multiple intelligence, preschoolers naïve psychology, and emergent emotional literacy (Pandey, 2003a).

- The children in preschools received almost negligible attention as compared to children in primary schools (Kaul, 2002).

- Schools as ideological context for preschool centers (Swaminathan, 1993).

- The unclear shape of early schooling between extreme opposite ends ranging from formal instruction to non-formal intervention strategies (Pandey, 2003a).

A recent study of private, unaided schools serving low-income families in different African and Indian settings revealed some interesting results (Tooley, 2005). In each country, the majority of poor schoolchildren attended private unaided schools. These schools were found to perform better than government schools at a low cost. A roughly equal number of boys and girls attended private unaided schools. These schools had lower pupil-teacher ratios, and higher teacher commitment and satisfaction, despite being paid considerably lower than the teachers in government schools.

The grievous case of ECE services poses many serious challenges before us. In the present research, a small attempt has been made to concomitantly answer twin questions: (i) What should be the mechanism of implementing quality childhood education in the country?

(ii) How to achieve the maximum advantage of the varied opportunities it offers for children?

ECE: The Approach of Other Countries

Reviewing and considering the experiences of other countries can provide an effective lens through which the international situation can be viewed; this will also provide an opportunity to learn from the experiences, success, and challenges of others. As reported in a previous World Bank Report (1996), the success of a child is determined by three primary factors: (i) the choice made by the society (primarily, the government) regarding the opportunities available to children and their parents (the social investment in children); (ii) the choices made by parents regarding the resources which their children have access to (parental investment in children); and (iii) the choice that the child makes given the investments and opportunities made available to him or her.

The term "child-centered" is often applied to early childhood pedagogical approaches. The imputation is that the child is at the epicenter not only of the system but also of the world. The different cultural perceptions of childhood influence the nature and amount of ECE worldwide. There is no one childhood; rather, there are many different ones according to the construction of adults. The construction of childhood influences the

number of places we create for our children, how and what we teach them, and also our expectations of them.

Different countries, even those that are geographically or politically close to each other, often have different traditions and conceptions of early childhood, reflecting the different cultural values, social context, and views of the role of ECE.

Italy's approach to ECE has attracted the most attention. Schools in Reggio Emilia share a philosophy about how children best grow in every sense, namely cognitively, socially, and emotionally, but also have a shared sense of mission in terms of perceptions of children, their families and their communities. This sense of mission is inexplicitly communicated to parents and teachers. The constant quest to know more is reflected in the discussion between teachers, teachers and pedagogists, and with children.

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood is exemplified in this extract written by their founding father:

> Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not only see them as engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the reflective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and, most of all, connected to adults and children. (Malaguzzi, 1993: 10)

The Te Whariki document of New Zealand sets out early childhood curriculum guidelines (Carr and May 1992). It reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work, which takes

into account children in their familial, community, and national context, thus reflecting the social construction of childhood. Settings are characterized by dialogue and interaction between children and their peers, as well as with adults. Children explore and interact with their environments, learning to meet challenges and to cope with change. Individual needs are met and the children develop a growing sense of responsibility. Te Whariki encompasses the years from birth to school entry, which takes place at six years and takes into account of the differences between children, so that the focus of the curriculum and the direction and pace of learning will vary from day to day according to children's needs and interests.

In the United Kingdom, the distinct discourse of ECE draws on the discipline of developmental psychology, emphasizes the importance of young children learning through firsthand experience within a child-centered learning environment. This discourse exists in tension with statutory schooling discourse, which emphasizes preparation of children for "real" school, in particular their induction into and achievements in the "basics" of literacy and numeracy, and preparation for the world of work.

As in the United Kingdom, in Australia too learning and pedagogy have been framed from within a developmental paradigm, mostly influenced by developmental psychology. The enactment of this theoretical prospective in early childhood centers has been mostly shaped by the USA through their construction and discourses of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).

While it has been recognized that various different interest groups such as children, parents, practitioners, and stakeholders may all have different viewpoints regarding the definition of quality means in terms of early childhood provisions, there is an argument for developing common indicators of quality (Raban et al., 2003). Curtis and D'Hagan (2003:169) discuss the guidelines for quality early years provision that were developed by two international organizations, namely, World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) and American Childhood Education International (ACE), in 1999. These organizations agreed that effective early year's provision involves a comprehensive network of services that provide:

- environment and physical space settings for children
- curriculum context and pedagogy
- early childhood educators and caregivers
- partnership with families and communities
- services for young children with special needs, and
- accountability, supervision, and management of programs for young children.

Longitudinal studies from America have provided powerful arguments and evidence for pre-school education. The High/Scope Perry pre-school evaluation (Schweinhart et.al., 1993) showed the substantial benefits gained through pre-schooling for children brought up in poverty and at high risk of school failure. Research findings from the longitudinal study in New Zealand "Competent Children" (Wylie, 1998) suggest that by six years of

age, children gained higher or lower educational outcomes depending on factors such as age at which children started ECE, quality of staff interactions with children, and the extent to which children were allowed to complete activities. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in the United Kingdom reported significant effects on children's progress during the preschool years. Some of the findings of the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study (Siraj Blackford et al., 2002) have been listed below:

- Effective pedagogy is both teaching and the provision of instructive learning and play environments and routines.
- The most effective settings provide both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities
- The most highly qualified staff provide the most direct teaching but also the kind of interactions that guide but do not dominate children's thinking
- Effective settings view cognitive and social development as complementary
- The most effective settings have shared educational aims with parents supported by regular communications.

These findings provide evidence to avoid a range of pedagogical practices that can affect child outcomes.

A number of international research studies have reported that high-quality ECE has long-term benefits for children (Podmore and Meade, 2000). The indicators of quality noted in research literature include: structural (e.g., staff-child ratios; group size; staff learning, education, and experience; staff wages and working conditions; and staff stability) and procedural (e.g., staff qualifications) indicators.

Smith et al. (2000: 49) have reported that it is difficult to isolate the effect of a single quality indicator, because good things go together, particularly ratios, group size, and caregiver training.

Various comparative perspectives of preschools across three cultures, namely, Japan, China, and the United States revealed that preschools work more to instill than to subvert the values that parents of these countries wish to pass on to their children. They look to preschool to play an essentially compensatory and conservative role of minimizing the effects of changes on the lives of young children.

The five pre-school curricula outlined in this study are Experimental Education (EXE), High/Scope (H/S), Reggio Emilia (RTE), the Swedish curriculum (Lpfo), and Te Whariki (TW). The last two are national programs, while the first three were locally developed. The locally developed programs may involve a larger number of children than the national ones. All these curricula describe the child as an active child who is interested in the surrounding world. All programs have visualized the meaning of children's rights, parent's co-operation, reflective staff for understanding the children, value orientation, and teachers' professionalism. The differences were found to vary in the cultural context, learning environment, and evaluation.

The purpose and intent of this review was to show how educational programs differ and how they combined strengths, illustrating their power of intervention in the lives of young children and their families.