

## Early Childhood Care and Education

(GS Paper 2, Governance)

### Context:

- The idea of national duty conjures up images of military uniforms and safeguarding borders. National duty is not something generally associated with teachers. But the fundamental reason why a **nation protects its borders is to preserve the dignity of its citizens**, and this is **not possible without education**.
- And ECCE (Early childhood care and education) provides the substratum to education- on which capability and capacity is built.



### Scope:

- Early childhood care and education (ECCE), as defined by UNESCO, is the “holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.”
- ECCE is fundamental to improve and develop their cognitive, socio-emotional, and life skills at an early age.
- This skill and knowledge is essential to putting these children, and the country, onto a path of greater prosperity and dignity for all.

### How ECCE is a national duty stems from the following numbers?

- **India is home to 313 million illiterate people**, 59 per cent of whom are women. This has a **staggering socio-economic cost**.
- Effective implementation of **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** can potentially grow Indian GDP by 7.39 per cent when the benefits are calculated over 20 years.
- The cost of illiteracy due to lost earnings and business productivity stands at 1.2% of GDP for emerging economies, which means India potentially loses ₹3,930 crores each year to illiteracy.
- Over 43% of children in India under the age of five are at risk of not fulfilling their full developmental potential due to poor nutrition, poverty, and lack of early stimulation. This can hamper their growth and development, with consequences felt into adulthood.

### Investment in ECCE:

- Historically, defence has one of the largest budget allocations.
- For example, India's expenditure on defence constituted 15.5 per cent of the Central government's budget in 2020-21.
- Spending on education was 10.4 per cent of the central government's budget in the same year, according to the Economic Survey 2021. The argument remains that India needs to spend more on both, defence as well as ECCE.

#### Focus on ECCE in budget outlay:

- The key here is that **ECCE is a very small part of the education outlays**, a majority of the budget goes to primary, secondary and higher education.
- The focus of this allocation is flawed; because **unless quality early childhood programs can deliver cognitive, linguistic, and social skill development**, children cannot make the most of school and higher education.
- Currently, on the ground there are several issues that indicate that 'national duty' is not uppermost on the minds of our preschool administrators.

#### Valid Concerns:

- Pre-schools are treated as 'Khichdi centres' instead of a foundation for lifelong learning.
- Workers in pre-school systems have to **multitask- perform dual roles as helpers and teachers**. They face a complete conflict of identity. There is **no centralised, standardised training** made available to them- unlike the defence forces.
- In several environments, **learning ABCD is considered a complete waste of time** and teachers often face the brunt of disrespect. It is difficult to keep teachers motivated in communities where their work is not valued.
- It is **not known and acknowledged that neglecting ECCE has a socio-economic impact**.
- A 15-year-long longitudinal study showed that **children who did not receive preschool education were 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime** by the time they turned eighteen. This is a high cost to the economy in terms of maintaining prisons, administrating the courts and running the justice system.
- **India cannot break the cycle of poverty, address inequality, and create the human capital** needed for future growth without attention to ECCE.

#### Culture shift:

- Clearly, what is needed is a culture shift towards the approach to ECCE. Just like there is no need to convince people about the importance of a strong military to a nation, there must be no ambiguity about the critical contribution of its ECCE warriors either.
- There is data that shows the benefits of ECCE, for example, early interventions can help increase adult wages later in life, and is a cost-effective strategy for sustainable long-term growth. Each additional year of schooling up to the age of seven potentially adds ₹52,470 per annum to adult income.
- There is also data that shows what happens in the absence of effective ECCE. For instance, in various nations estimates show that 60-80% of prisoners have reading and writing skills below basic levels.

#### Way Forward:

- The urgent requirement of the hour is to build capacity.
- There is need to train ECCE workers; create institutional capacities to empower helpers, and teachers and define a common understanding of what is 'school readiness' in keeping with the technologies of the day.
- Ensuring universality apropos what is an acceptable standard in ECCE for services, facilities, assessment mechanisms and infrastructure is imperative.