

Venita Kaul · Suman Bhattacharjea  
*Editors*

# Early Childhood Education and School Readiness in India

Quality and Diversity

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# Foreword

In a starkly unequal society like India with a democratic polity, public education is an extremely important focal point of aspiration for a large segment of the population located in the social and economic margins, something that no political formation can afford to ignore any longer. In spite of greater focus on elementary education, particularly after the enactment of the Right to Education (RTE), there still remain major hurdles in the path of the poor and the marginalized towards participating meaningfully in schooling. The early years of schooling pose the most difficult of challenges for children from the margins given the state of school readiness they are in. Here, school readiness is understood not merely as a characterization of the child; it is as much about the preparedness of the family, the preschool, and the entire formal and informal processes that are meant to facilitate transition of the child from home to school. Indeed, it is also about ‘child readiness’ of the school!

It is well known that the educational trajectory of the child is path dependent – the foundations laid in the early years of schooling determine how far and how well the child’s schooling is likely to go. It is widely acknowledged among scholars and practitioners that a well-designed and well-managed Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme focusing on school readiness of the child and the family (as well as child readiness of the school) can provide a head-start to effective participation in schooling by children from the margins. Yet, there is perhaps still not enough conviction in the policy circles in India even at the present juncture for provisioning adequate resources for assuring quality of ECCE or for extending the ambit of the RTE to include the preschool years as well. This is where policy advocacy based on strong research foundations has a significant role to play.

It was the recognition that universities need to provide credible platforms for research designed to support policy advocacy that led to the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) in Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) shortly after the establishment of the University itself. There was a fortuitous convergence of circumstances that led to CECED’s success, and Professor Venita Kaul’s leadership and the untiring efforts of the dedicated team of professionals that she created and nurtured at CECED were certainly the most

important among them. Doubtless, it helped CECED a great deal that it was located in an ecosystem that was nurtured out of a deep conviction in the AUD's founding leadership about the importance of investing in innovative institutional structures and arrangements to support generation of new knowledge with a view to not merely comprehending complex fluxes of social realities but indeed to intervening in and transforming them.

The India Early Childhood Education Impact (IECEI) Study, of which the present book is an outcome, is itself a path-breaking one, in its conception, design, as well as execution. The magnitude of its empirical base is itself astounding, both in a spatial and a temporal sense. Longitudinal studies involving both quantitative and qualitative explorations are seldom undertaken and executed with such rigour and competence as was done in the IECEI Study. The Study had multiple stakeholders – besides the University and the academia, the Study elicited the participation of governments, NGOs, and international agencies as well. There was a constant presence of highly credible and respected researchers in the field like Professor T. S. Saraswathi right through the life cycle of the Study, whose guidance and advice have gone a long way in ensuring its rigour and credibility. That CECED collaborated with ASER Centre in the IECEI Study also enhanced the competence and effectiveness with which it was conducted. This collaboration was a symbiotic arrangement – the rigour associated with the qualitative and the quantitative dimensions of the methodology of the Study got enhanced through this collaboration in a mutually complementary manner. As the Study unfolded, CECED organized a series of public events, one at every milestone, each meant for sharing and collective reflection on interim glimpses of the reality that the study revealed. These events brought together the whole array of stakeholders. These events demonstrated effectively how strategically critical it is for policy research to keep the momentum of communication going, with the objective of sustaining a sense of ownership for the study and its outcomes among all the stakeholders.

The various chapters of this book are not merely about presentation of the different findings of the IECEI Study. Each one of them is in a way a stand-alone work of scholarship. Each chapter tries to locate within the context of policy and practice particular research questions posed in the study, the manner in which empirical explorations are attempted to address these questions, and the findings that emerge from such explorations. Some of the chapters also attempt to present these explorations meaningfully within the perspective of the larger terrain of scholarship in the area.

A book like this is not meant as a storehouse of esoteric scholarship, although it is undoubtedly the outcome of concerted and focused application of the best of scholarship in the field. This book is meant as an important tool for political mobilization, for organizing civil society initiatives, and for policy advocacy. It also will serve as a priceless reference point for policy practice. Equally important, the book and the Study whose essence it attempts to communicate offer critical insights into complex social and cultural dynamics that scholars and practitioners in the field will gain much out of. It will be used widely as an important scholarly reference. The book generates seminal research questions for furthering the frontiers of scholarship

in the fields of education, childhood studies, and public policy. It also calls for more informed and concerted scholarly attempts at theorization on childhood(s) and public education in societies characterized by extreme inequalities. The book is an important milestone that builds the (more often than not dysfunctional) links between the three apices of the practice-policy-research triangle.

I have a profound sense of fulfillment and pride in writing this foreword. I am greatly honoured and have a sense of deep gratitude for having been asked to write this. This book epitomizes, in more sense than one, the culmination of 10 years of meaningful and authentic work in ECCE done at the CECED, and I have no hesitation in considering this as one of the most significant achievements of the first decade of AUD. Personally, I feel heartened and grateful that I have had the invaluable opportunity of a ringside view of the IECEI Study at every stage of its progress, and of playing a part, albeit one behind the scenes, in nurturing and backstopping the idea all through.

Former Vice Chancellor, Ambedkar University Delhi  
Delhi, India  
6 January 2019

Shyam B. Menon

# Preface

Intuitively, we all understand the phrase ‘catch them young.’ Today, we also know that the phrase is backed by substantial empirical evidence from around the world. Research in a variety of disciplines and contexts confirms that we can best help children acquire the skills and abilities that they will need in the future, both in school and in life, if we ensure that they have access to appropriate environments and inputs in the first 8 years of their lives.

What can sometimes be confusing is understanding what is meant by ‘appropriate’ inputs. Very often, we think that young children should mainly learn to ‘behave’: sit still, be quiet, don’t fidget, and do as you are told. In addition, in the context of the soaring ambitions generated by a school system that has expanded enormously over the course of a single generation, we push our young children to learn, for example, to recite numbers from 1 to 100, because we think this will help them get ahead of the class before they have even entered school. There is a widespread belief that by ensuring that our young children are able to recite, ‘A for Apple, B for Ball,’ we are accelerating their learning and equipping them well for the future.

What is not clearly understood is that these good intentions often translate into very poor ways of supporting children’s learning. Strikingly, this lack of understanding is as visible among teachers in elite private preschools in India’s metros as it is among unschooled mothers in remote rural villages in the country.

But, as child development experts point out, giving children a head-start can mean allowing them to learn at their own pace and making sure we do not push them too far, too fast. Young children learn through play, and their learning process is experiential, less structured, and more multifaceted than anything our adult selves perhaps recognize as ‘learning.’ The impact of this lack of understanding (ours, not the children’s) is that we are sending children to school without the foundational understanding and abilities that will help them make sense of a formal academic curriculum once they begin school.

Until recently, there was no large-scale evidence available in India on children’s preparedness for school in the years just prior to entering Grade 1 or the extent to which the skills and abilities they brought with them affected their ability to cope with the curriculum in early primary grades. The longitudinal, mixed-methods India



Early Childhood Education Impact (IECEI) Study, which sampled about 14,000 4-year-old children from 3 major states (Rajasthan, Assam, and Telangana) and tracked them over a period of 4 years, was a major step in this direction. A collaboration between the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) at Ambedkar University Delhi and ASER Centre, with support from UNICEF and a range of government, academic, and non-government organizations and institutions, the IECEI Study generated a treasure trove of information about young children between the ages of 4 and 8 in India: where they are, what they do, and what they learn.

The published findings provided a first set of answers to the questions we posed when we started the study. But as often happens with research, every finding we reported led to a new set of questions to explore. This book builds on those findings and is the result of this second round of thinking about what we found and what it means. The study's most important findings provide the basis for our title – 'Early Childhood Education and School Readiness in India: Quality and Diversity.' Every author contributing to this volume was involved with the study in some way, whether at the stage of design, implementation, data analysis, or all of these.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I establishes the context for the rest of the book with two chapters written by Venita Kaul. In Chap. 1, she unpacks the concept of 'school readiness' and the different ways in which it can be understood. She then grounds this concept in the Indian context, tracing the ways in which early childhood education (ECE), which is potentially closely associated with school readiness, has been conceptualized, designed, and implemented in India over the years. In Chap. 2, she reviews the research that has been done in India on ECE and children's school readiness, ending with a summary of the design, major findings, and recommendations of the IECEI Study.

The remaining three parts of the book are organized in accordance with our understanding of children's development as a process of *interaction* between the child and his or her environment. As Venita Kaul explains in her introductory chapter, current conceptualizations of school readiness go well beyond assuming that it is the child who has to do all the work of becoming 'ready for school.' Preschools and schools, parents, and communities all have a critical role to play in providing an environment that enables children to grow and thrive. Accordingly, the remaining parts of the book are organized around three key dimensions of school readiness. Part II explores the topic of 'Children Ready for School,' Part III is organized around the theme 'Schools Ready for Children,' and Part IV addresses the issue 'Families Ready for School.'

Part II, 'Children Ready for School,' contains three chapters. The first two of these explore two completely different child characteristics and their relevance for children's school readiness. In Chap. 3, Manjistha Banerji and Mansi Nanda use data from IECEI as well as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) to examine whether children's age affects their school readiness levels. In a context where children are in school sometimes as early as age 4, and where many states permit entry to Grade 1 at age 5, a discussion on whether age of entry to school matters is clearly relevant. In Chap. 4, Meenakshi Dogra and Aparajita Bhargarh Chaudhary

unpack children's psychosocial development as an important domain influencing their readiness for school and discuss the importance of developing culturally grounded metrics and measures that capture these aspects of children's development in ways that can inform action on the ground. And in Chap. 5, Wilima Wadhwa, Suman Bhattacharjea, and Manjistha Banerji examine whether the quantum of exposure to early childhood education programmes does in fact improve children's early grade learning.

Part III on 'Schools Ready for Children' is the longest Part in the book, with five chapters exploring the institution of a 'school' (including preschool) from a variety of perspectives. Chapter 6, by Purnima Ramanujan and Nayan Dave, sets the stage by consolidating data from various sources to look at trends in the provision of ECE facilities in India. In Chap. 7, Aparajita Bhargarh Chaudhary and Venita Kaul use IECEI data to analyse the relationship between the pedagogy used in preschool classrooms (specifically, traditional, teacher-centric 'chalk and talk' instruction versus more flexible, play-based, child-centred methods) and individual indicators of school readiness. They conclude that the IECEI Study provides hard evidence for what child development experts have been saying for years regarding appropriate environments for young children. Chapter 8 by Sunita Singh also uses IECEI data to explore language and literacy instruction in early primary grades. She finds that despite variations across the three states covered by IECEI, instructional practices in early grades rarely encourage children to become independent readers and writers. Chapter 9 by Sunita Singh and Aparajita Bhargarh Chaudhary takes on the vitally important topic of teachers, examining teachers' beliefs regarding early childhood education and the ways in which these affect their classroom teaching practices. And in Chap. 10, Suman Bhattacharjea looks critically at some key assumptions underlying the ways in which schooling is organized. She concludes that the age-grade structure, so fundamental to school systems in most countries in the world, is deeply inhospitable to children.

Finally, in the book's concluding Part on 'Families Ready for School,' Benjamin Alcott, Suman Bhattacharjea, Purnima Ramanujan, and Mansi Nanda take a closer look at participation trends in ECE in India. They use both quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of the IECEI Study to understand not only *whether* children participate in preschool but also *which* provider they attend and *when* they do so and the ways in which these decisions reflect parents' perceptions about appropriate environments for young children.

In many ways, this book marks an end point to the 7-year journey that we undertook together as CECED and ASER Centre, supported by our state partners, funding agencies, and government departments. This journey was largely made possible thanks to a team of young researchers who brought dynamism and dedication in addition to a variety of skills to the project. Many of them are authors of the chapters in this volume, and we take this opportunity to thank them for their excellent contributions. We would especially like to thank Meenakshi Dogra who, while also an author, agreed to coordinate the entire process of negotiating deadlines and coordinating with authors for chapter submissions despite a heavy work schedule of her own. We would also like to extend our grateful thanks to Professor Vrinda Datta,

Director of CECED, and Dr. Payal Sahu for their willing facilitation, to Professor Shyam Menon for his steady support to both the longitudinal research and this publication, and to Punam Thakur for her efficient and meticulous editing.

Last but certainly not least, we have been very privileged to have been supported and accompanied throughout this journey by Professor T. S. Saraswathi, Professor Emerita of Human Development and Family Studies at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. It is in large measure thanks to her that this book became a reality, and so it is entirely fitting that, along with the editors of this volume, she has the last word.

New Delhi, India  
New Delhi, India

Venita Kaul  
Suman Bhattacharjea

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# **Part I**

## **Background**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Positioning School Readiness and Early Childhood Education in the Indian Context



Venita Kaul

**Abstract** This chapter provides a theoretical, conceptual, and contextual introduction to the book. It is divided into two parts, with the first part focusing on helping the readers develop a technical understanding of the meaning, scope, and significance of the concepts of early childhood education and school readiness and their interrelationships. This discussion rests in the context of the current “learning crisis” that is looming large over school education across the Global South. The second part places the discussion specifically in the Indian context, with the aim of familiarizing readers with the broader landscape of policies and provisions in early childhood education and school readiness in the country; it also gives a glimpse of the challenges that still remain.

**Keywords** Early years · Early childhood · School readiness · Learning levels · Early childhood in India

### Learning Crisis, Early Childhood Education (ECE), and School Readiness: Are These Linked?

India has experienced a positive change over the last two decades which is reflected in parental demand for children’s schooling. This was earlier a significant challenge among the marginalized communities, but is no longer a major issue. This shift is not based solely on anecdotal evidence but from the significant increase evident nationally in the gross enrolment ratio (GER) among 6- to 14-year-olds from 81.6% in 2000–01 to 96.9% in 2014–15 (GoI, 2016). School infrastructure and teacher availability have also shown significant improvements, largely through the initiatives under the Government of India’s “Education for All” program, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). While these are positive trends, the downside is that basic learning levels of a large majority of children remain persistently low, with significant numbers continuing to not learn at their grade levels (ASER Centre, 2017).

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This reflects an escalating early learning crisis of “schooling without learning” (World Bank, 2018). This situation is not exclusive to India: 250 million children worldwide cannot read, write, or do basic mathematics; 130 million of these are actually in school (UNESCO, 2013–14). This is an emerging crisis across low and middle-income countries in which “millions of young students ..... face the prospect of a lost opportunity ..... which is also a great injustice to children and young people worldwide. This learning crisis is widening social gaps instead of narrowing them” (WDR, 2018, p. 1).

While this undoubtedly calls for urgent action across the Global South, the key issue is: What should the action be? Typically, governments across countries tend to respond to low learning levels by addressing them once a child is already in school, mainly through investments in more effective assessment or monitoring mechanisms, teacher preparation, revision of textbooks, improved physical infrastructure, and so on.

While these are valid aspects to be considered, there is very limited discourse or reflection on identifying a more fundamental problem, which is that, while the curricular approaches and classroom practices tend to remain stagnant, the educational scenario is consistently changing with more and more children coming into the school system from diverse strata of society, many of whom are first-generation learners. This shift potentially has an enormous impact on children’s learning needs.

Some key questions that demand reflection are: What is the profile of the children who are coming into the public school system today? In what ways is this profile different from past generations, and what are the specific learning needs that are emerging because of this change? Are these children coming from literate families, as was the situation in the past when education was a privilege of a few, or are they in most cases first-generation learners with families who are themselves not familiar with the school system and thus not aware of what is good-quality education for their children and how to support their children’s learning? Are school curricula and practices responsive to these children’s emerging learning needs and “ready” for them? Above all, do the diverse experiences that the children come with from their early childhood years, equip them adequately to negotiate the conventional primary school curricular expectations?

These concerns can be condensed into three primary questions. First, are parents “ready” to prepare their children for the demands of schooling in terms of possessing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to enable them to give their children an appropriate early stimulation environment at home? Second, are schools “ready” with an early grades’ curricula and classroom environment, appropriate to and in upward continuity from preschool, to meet the emerging learning needs of the children coming into the school system? Third, and most importantly, what are the competencies that children need to acquire at the preschool level that will impact their learning levels in primary grades and to what extent are children in primary grades “ready” in terms of having acquired these foundational competencies?

This chapter is designed to give readers a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the issue of school readiness and its relationship with early childhood educa-



tion, which is also the focus of this volume. This is addressed from two perspectives: (a) Why it is important to locate the issue of low learning levels at the early childhood stage, that is, the need and significance of early childhood education, and (b) the concept and definition of school readiness, its association with early childhood education, and its impact on later learning, especially of mathematics and language at the school level. The chapter then moves to a discussion of the Indian context with regard to both early childhood education and school readiness in terms of policies, provisioning, and participation of children.

### *Significance of the Early Years of Life and the Critical Periods*

Multidisciplinary research from neurobiology, economics, and child development has provided credible evidence of the critical significance of the first few years of life for life-long development, with most of the brain growth already complete by the time a child is 5 years old (Haartsen, Jone, & Johnson, 2016). Research also confirms the importance of “stable, responsive, nurturing relationships and rich learning experiences in the earliest years that provide lifelong benefits for learning, behavior and both physical and mental health” (Shonkoff, 2009, p. 1). Within this span of the first 6 years of life, there is a succession of “critical periods” of development when a child is “biologically primed” to respond to appropriate stimulation, if available, which can lead to the development of more advanced neural structures and/or skills (Doherty, 1997). Each of these periods is associated with the formation of specific neural circuits that are associated with specific abilities. As the brain matures, higher-level circuits build on lower-level circuits (Shonkoff & Richter, 2013), thus confirming the fact that the learning process is cumulative and continuous in nature. These critical periods provide “windows of opportunity” for developing some specific competencies such as language fluency and social competency with peers, symbolic relevance, and certain cognitive competencies which are foundational, not only for school learning but also for lifelong learning and development (Doherty, 1997).

A crucial question that emerges is: What are the resources needed within a child’s environment in these earliest “critical periods” in life that have the potential to influence the quality of his/her experiential learning opportunities? Some of these relate to the family’s socioeconomic status such as mother’s education, availability of play and print material, responsive and interactive caregiver practices, health and nutritional security, learning environment at home, and community resources such as family support programs. But given that a large number of children, especially from more marginalized communities, are less likely to have access to many of these resources at home, another issue that arises is: Are these children coming to school with inadequate school preparedness or readiness?

This brings us to the next question: What are the specific aspects/attributes that constitute “school readiness”? Is school readiness a universal social construct

attributable to children primarily from a deficit perspective,<sup>1</sup> or should it be seen more comprehensively from an interactionist, sociocultural perspective in terms of the role that the family and the larger community, including early childhood education programs, can play in influencing a child's preparedness for school?

### ***School Readiness: How Do We Understand it?***

Readiness for school as a construct often gets engulfed in a debate as it is confused with the concept of "readiness to learn." While readiness for school implies preparing the child, in accordance with the child's developmental age and status, to succeed in a socially structured learning setting of a school, readiness to learn is a developmental characteristic or process from birth (UNICEF, 2012).

Definitions of school readiness available in literature stem from three different perspectives: The *maturationalist or nativist frame* considers readiness for schooling in terms of age and maturational status, often using developmental milestones as the eligibility criteria (Gessell, Ilg, & Ames, 1974; Pandis, 2001). This frame has influenced the practice of using age as the sole criterion for school admissions and this continues to be followed across many school systems today, including in India. The *empiricists'* view, on the other hand, focuses on a measurable set of skills and competencies which are relatively universal such as identification of colors, shapes, ability to count, and recognizing letters as indicators. This perspective views readiness as "something that lies outside the child" (Meisels, 1998, p. 52) which is taught by families, teachers, and schools that prepare children to "be successful in a typical school context" (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p. 338). Many current education programs, including private schools in India, tend to reflect this viewpoint (Brown, 2007). The *interactionist* perspective (Murphy & Burns, 2002) emphasizes the bidirectionality between a child and his/her environment. It draws on Piaget's constructivist viewpoint which highlights a child's active role in constructing his/her knowledge while also taking into account Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective which emphasizes the social dimension as being critical to the co-construction of understanding in a child. School readiness within this interactionist framework may be defined as a product of a child's contributions to schooling and the school's contribution to the child (Meisels, 1999; Smith, 2016).

The construct of school readiness also needs to be examined from the sociological perspective of social disadvantage and its association with school readiness. Evidence from neuroscience and developmental research indicates that the pre-school years represent a critical period in the development of certain mental processes that support effective, goal-oriented approaches to learning, particularly working memory and attention control. These mental processes are often delayed in

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<sup>1</sup>According to the social deficit perspective, individuals from underprivileged social groups inherently lack the potential or ability to achieve because their social and economic contexts limit their exposure levels.

children growing up in poverty (Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007) and appear to play a central role in predicting school adjustment and academic attainments (McClelland et al., 2007).

Research also demonstrates that a large number of children enter school lacking academic and /or social skills needed for success, with learning gaps widening over time since many education systems do not cater to this diversity in learning levels among children, resulting in a cumulative deficit (Feinstein, 2003; Pritchett & Beatty, 2012; Wildy & Styles, 2011). These skills could relate to a range of behaviors and abilities such as literacy, numeracy, ability to follow directions, working with other children, and engaging in learning activities, many of which require more specifically planned and structured experiences and learning opportunities for children during the early years, as foundational for later learning (Case, Griffin, & Kelly, 1999; Kaul, 1991; Mustard, 2002). Current research on school readiness is also informed by the emerging priority of the twenty-first century of children enabled to develop not just functional literacy but also higher-order thinking for problem-solving and wealth creation (O’Gara, 2013).

The EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2007) concludes that there is consensus in research which suggests that school readiness encompasses development in five distinct but interconnected domains: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning/language development, cognitive development, and general knowledge.

The UNICEF (2012) position paper on school readiness adopts a broader and more comprehensive definition from an interactionist perspective which specifies three dimensions – children’s readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children, and families’ and communities’ readiness for school. This definition moves the concept of school readiness away from a deficit approach of inadequacy in children to a broader frame that focuses on the need for an enabling social environment for children.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and School Readiness: A Positive Relationship***

The last two decades have seen significant and credible evidence building up globally on the benefits of investments in ECCE, particularly in the low- and middle-income countries in children’s health, learning, and behavior (Engle et al., 2011).

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<sup>2</sup>The IECEI study referred to in the preface and summarized in Chap. 2, which has formed the basis of this publication, derives its framework from this interactionist perspective in conceptualizing the construct of school readiness, reflecting a distinct and more eclectic perspective bringing the “social” and the “developing individual” within an interactive frame. A similar framework, which examines this phenomenon of school readiness comprehensively from the multiple perspectives of the child and the family and the quality of early educational experiences in preschool/school settings, has also informed the structure of this publication.