

Construction of Early Childhood and ECCD Service Provisioning in India

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Abstract

There has been a growing recognition among scholars in childhood studies that childhood is a social construction. Several historical and cross-cultural studies conducted across the world validate this argument, and whereby explains the variability that exist in the descriptions of childhood. These constructions not only differ at the cultural or temporal level, they also differ at the individual or institutional level. In a contemporary society, individuals, professionals, service institutions and policy communities – all construct their own version of childhood based on their subjective understandings, experiences and theoretical perspectives. At the policy level, therefore, these constructions have a significant role to play in the designing of services, institutions and pedagogy for early childhood intervention. This paper critically examines the model of early childhood constructed in the policy provisioning of early childhood care and development (ECCD) in India. Drawing on literatures mostly from the Euro-American context, at the outset, the paper elaborates the shift that took place in the ontology of children. The distinctions between child development theories, which chiefly inform the policy community, and the social constructionist approach, which is considered as an alternative, are then analyzed as central to early childhood service provisioning. The paper problematizes the policy documents, while doing so, it picks up few key issues and (re)open up the debates on ‘developmentally appropriate practices’ and ‘play-based education’. The paper concludes by suggesting that oversubscription of child development theories or total obscurity of social constructionist perspectives not augurs well for policy formulation. Further it stresses that there is a need to understand what children’s lived experiences are in the early childhood institutions, what parental constructions are on early childhood service provisioning and, how that can be incorporated to establish clear policy goals.

Keywords: Social Construction, Early Childhood Care and Development, Child Development.

Introduction

The last quarter of a century has witnessed a conceptual shift in the childhood discourse (James & Prout 1990; Dekker 2000). Theories related to children and childhood underwent significant transformations. The veracity of child development theories, which says development is ‘natural’ and ‘universal’, has been widely contested. The western notion of ‘ideal childhood’, which is enmeshed in late modernity, considering childhood as the period of play and education was also conceptually challenged (Boyden 1990; Nieuwenhuys 1994, 2009; Burman 1994, 1996; Viruru 2001). In effect, a growing body of literatures in childhood studies asserts that childhood is a social construction (James and Prout 1990; Qvortrup *et al.* 1994; James *et al.* 1998). They further recognize that these social constructions, partly or fully, govern our way of life and determine the policy or services a country formulates for children (Moss and Petrie 2002, Dahlberg *et al.* 2007).

Guided by this social constructionist approach, this paper explores the construction of ‘*early childhood*’ in the service provisioning of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)¹ in

¹ The term ECCD includes early childhood education. However, different literatures use different terminologies such as Early Childhood Development (ECD), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Early Childhood Care for Development (ECCD) and so on.

India. ECCD is an overarching concept that involves a multi disciplinary approach and, more or less, advocated as a tool for attaining Millennium Development Goals (MDGs²) and eventually achieving children's rights. The Consultative Group on ECCD³, which act as a nodal agency at a global level, defines ECCD as the period between 0-8 years that 'comprises all the essential supports a young child needs to survive and thrive in life'. These services include childcare, health, nutrition and a condition for active learning.

Although the term ECCD sounds well at the conceptual level, at the level of practice, it was found in diluted and fragmented forms in India. While the Government run Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) target its focus mainly on health and nutritional components, private services are obsessed primarily with preschool education (Prochner 2002). Therefore, to strike a balance between both, this paper uses ICDS project documents, National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) position paper on Early Childhood Education and academic literatures for analysis. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part, drawing on literatures mostly from the Euro-American context, illustrates the transition took place in the ontology of children. This will form a basis to engage our analysis later in this paper. The paper then moves on to describe the journey of ECCD at a global and national level and the construction of childhood that underlies it. Further, it explains how these western conceptions are exported and naturalized in the Indian context. The final part problematizes the policy documents and analyzes the type of childhood represent in it. While doing so, it picks up few key issues from the documents and (re)open up the debates on 'developmentally appropriate practices' and 'play-based education'. The paper concludes by suggesting that oversubscription of child development theories or total obscurity of social constructionist perspectives not augurs well for policy formulation. Further it stresses that there is a need to understand what children's lived experiences are in the early childhood institutions, what parental constructions are on early childhood and, how that can be incorporated to establish clear policy goals.

I

Conceptualization and Reconceptualization from Different Academic Lens

Before moving on to discuss the policy issues, it is pertinent to outline the broader theoretical context upon which the whole childhood discourse is based and in which the analysis of this paper is intertwined. It's essential to mention that, the modern concept of '*childhood*' was born out of western enlightenment and post modernity, thus, this paper chiefly engages western resources for theoretical explanations. Three major scientific literatures viz. *historical*, *anthropological* and *sociological* share a common interest in children and can be used to explain the shift that took place in the conceptualization of childhood in recent time. They demonstrate how 'childhood studies', which is interdisciplinary and combines knowledge from many disciplines such as *history*, *anthropology* and *sociology*, reconceptualize childhood differently

² In 2000, after the millennium summit the United Nations has adopted millennium declaration which is now known as MDGs to reduce extreme poverty by 2015. Five of the MDG targets, such as halve poverty, universal education, gender equality, child health and maternal health, are directly or indirectly related to children.

See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml> accessed at 15th August, 2010.

³ The Consultative Group on ECCD consist of many funding agencies such as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, Save the Children and Plan International. They advocate ECCD activities around the globe. See http://www.ecdgroup.com/what_is_ECCD.asp

from developmental psychology. This is explained here briefly for the readers those who are not (or) less familiar with on this field.

Psychological – Developmental psychology, which is well known for its scientific explanation of child development theories, was undisputedly the dominant knowledge force for a long time (Woodhead 1990; Burman 1996). Childhood and early childhood in developmental psychology are described in chronological age and distinctly marked as a period in human life. Children's needs, socialization, personality traits and the process of physical, cognitive, language, motor and social development - all are conceptualized, validated and rehearsed within the realm of child development theories. In this intellectual tradition, Piaget and Vygotsky are most notable figures who have exerted immense influence through their works on theorizing child development (Corsaro 2004).

Piaget's scientific explanations juxtaposing with nature and biology took a standardized view that the pattern of development that occurs in a child is natural and universal (Goswami 1998). In Piaget's view, children pass through a series of stages before they construct the ability to perceive, reason and understand in mature, rational terms (Wood 1998). Vygotsky, however, challenges Piaget's self explorative theory and emphasizes the significance of cultural factors in the development of children's cognitive abilities. Despite this difference, in common, the literatures in developmental psychology places children in a 'linear development model' (Burman 1995), which has different sub-stages that corresponds to predefined developmental milestones and overall personality development (Smith *et al.* 2003). Consistent with this theorization, wider body of empirical studies have been conducted for assessing children's cognitive, social, language and emotional developments. A content analysis of scientific literatures published in the Journals of *Developmental Psychology* and *Child Development* shows that children are studied by scholars on a range of issues, but most of them are related to three broad categories: cognitive, social and language development (Sigel and Kim 1996).

As will be shown later, child development theories are however criticized, especially within the childhood studies paradigm, for their one-dimensional scientific inquiry and ignorance of social, cultural and material aspects of the child. Modern day psychologists like Burman (1994, 1996) and Woodhead (1990) acknowledge these theoretical shortcomings and suggest the need for moving the conceptual boundaries beyond biological and western ethnocentric entities.

Historical – The works of historians in literatures are mostly centered on exploring how children or the concept of childhood understood in different periods of time. These historical works mainly help us to understand the temporal differences in the evolution of concept. In the historiography of childhood, Philippe Aries's (1962) work on *Centuries of Childhood* has made a significant contribution and provoked profound interest among scholars. By using such sources as medieval art and Dauphin diary, Aries concluded that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (1962, pp. 125). Further, he claims that, children were treated as miniature adults in the past, but that this does not mean that 'children were neglected, forsaken or despised' (ibid, pp. 125). In his view, the modern concept of childhood has emerged only after the mid 18th century. Aries's work was, however, criticized by other historians, especially on the methodological grounds, who said Aries 'misinterpreted the evidence he did use, and ignored other evidence' (Cunningham 1996, pp. 27). They substantiated their argument by pointing to

some of the medical literatures in which the child related illness is distinctly mentioned and other literatures that recognized different developmental sub-stages as separate periods within childhood (ibid, pp 27).

Then, in the 1970's Lloyd de Mause used a psychogenic theory of history to study the parental behaviours and attitudes towards children. He arrived at the conclusion, what one can view in a slightly different tone to Aries, that 'the further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused' (de Mause 1976, pp. 1). Later, in the 1980's Pollock used a different set of tools such as British and American diaries, autobiographies and related sources to analyze adult-child relationship. With her findings she challenged both Aries and de Mause and concluded that children in the medieval period were treated in the same way as in the contemporary period, and that no significant changes took place in the adult-child relationship or child rearing practices over these periods. She further defended her position that, there had been constancy in parental care, and the reporting of 'battering' of children or child abuse was not as widely prevalent in those periods as had been claimed (Pollock 1983).

All of these historical works are, however, still contested by other historians. Some of the methodological debates found in these works are very common to historical research: researcher's predisposition of present day concepts while studying the past, distortion of historical events by the ruling class, the researcher's focus on a particular group assuming that the practices are prevalent in the society, and so on (Cunningham 1996). Nevertheless, these historical works laid the foundation to understand variability in the construction of childhoods between different historical periods.

Anthropological – Anthropology has produced a range of literatures on children and childhood. Children are mainly investigated through ethnographic studies in order to understand the variability across space, especially the cultural influences on everyday life. Harkness (1996), for example, describes how the images of childhood are constituted in anthropological studies differently at different point of time, from seeing them as an abstraction to the present status of considering them as a culturally structured 'developmental niche'. Initial anthropological literatures located children in ceremonial life, then as an expression of cultural patterns, and then as a link in a cultural system.

Major contributions in this scholarly tradition include Mead's work (original in 1929, reproduced in 1973) on 'pattern of culture', which explored the association between individual behaviour and culture in Samoan girls, and Whiting's work on 'six culture studies' which looked at child rearing practices and children's behaviour in six cultures including in India (Whiting 1963). However, in the 1970's it was Charlotte Hardman who first rejected the notion of viewing children in anthropological studies 'as passive objects, as helpless spectators' of environmental circumstances that affects and shapes their behaviour (original in 1973 and reproduced in 2001, pp. 504). Instead, she suggested that 'children as people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching' in the anthropological studies (ibid, pp. 504).

Sociological - Until the 1970's children were predominantly studied by family sociologists within a family context. As James and Prout (1996) noted, children's experiences within the family

were subdued and studied under various themes such as ‘child-rearing’, ‘socialization’, ‘education’ and so on. The late 1970’s marked a shift in the theorization of childhood and sociologists together with anthropologists increasingly made the assertion that childhood is a social construction, which occurs in infinite and unidentifiable forms (James and Prout 1990; Qvortrup *et al.* 1994). Children are conceptually liberated, especially from biological determinism, and their ‘agency’ and ‘citizenship’ are recognized in literatures. An explosion of literatures subsequently started to conceptualize children as ‘active agent’ of their own social worlds. Two assumptions of child development theories viewing children as *miniature adult*, *deficit of competency and rationality* and legitimizing the pattern of development as *natural and universal* are strongly contested within this theoretical territory (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994; James *et al.* 1998; Corsaro 2004).

The term ‘social constructionism’ however has its genesis in the changes that took place in social sciences against the positivist dominance in the second half of the twentieth century (James *et al.* 1998; Burr 2003). Scholars from this school of thought dismissed the conventional notion that the world as it appears before us is objective and unbiased. Berger and Luckmann (1966), for example, in their work ‘*The Social Construction of Reality*’ describe that the terms both ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ are relative, and that people, through their inter-subjective interactive process, contributes to objectivation in the world. Interestingly, people through their interactions and language construct their own world at the same time as they tend to believe that their ‘experiences as something other than a human product’ (ibid, pp. 78). According to social constructionist, there is no absolute knowledge or absolute reality exist in the world, and people with their inter-personal relationships in daily lives construct knowledge and these constructions sustain some pattern of social action (Burr 2003, Dahlberg *et al.* 2007).

In the field of childhood studies James *et al.* (1998), drawing on influences from this approach and inferences from the early historical and cross-cultural scholarly works, theorized social constructionism as one of the approaches for studying children. From this social constructionist perspective there is nothing called ‘childhood’ or ‘early childhood’ that can be considered as *a priori* knowledge, rather people give meaning to it through their day to day interactions and life experiences. To put this in simple terms, the idea of childhood or early childhood is not a pre-defined or pre-existed one, but one that we create, based on ‘our images of what a child is, and can be and should be’ (Dahlberg *et al.* 2007, pp. 62). For instance, as Prout and James explain ‘the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life’ but the way this immaturity is interpreted and given meaning is a matter of cultural fact (1990, pp. 7). The historical works of Aries (1962), de Mause (1976) and Pollock (1983) and the cross-cultural works of Boyden (1990), Nieuwenhuys (1994) and Stephens (1995) authenticate this argument and whereby explains the cultural and temporal variability in the description of childhood. More importantly, these constructions not only differ at the macro level or at the temporal level, they also differ at the individual or institutional level. For example, in a given society, ‘particular disciplines, professions, agencies, settings and policy areas each create or construct particular versions of childhood and images of the child shaped by their own theories, understandings and perspectives’ (Moss and Petrie 2002, pp. 20). In the early childhood context, these constructions have an important role to play in the designing of services, institutions and pedagogy (Dahlberg *et al.* 2007).

We are also mindful of the criticisms of the social constructionist approach. Some authors argue that social constructionism's focus upon socio-cultural aspects of childhood has 'led to a degree of relativism' (Wyness 2000, pp. 23) and fails to bring any consensus on describing the universalistic characteristics of childhood (Qvortup *et al.* 1994). Further, they argue that this creates a major problem when informing the policy community about children's needs and what actions are required for framing legislation or service provisioning at the macro level.

II

Conceptualization in ECCD at the Global and National Level

In the past, in general, family is the place where the care was provided and where young children developed. But, this predominant practice of providing care for young children in the family environment has now become institutionalized and, as a result of changing socio-economic and cultural conditions, care is often provided by a combination of service providers (UNICEF 2008). This section sketches the journey of ECCD at the global and national level and highlights the dominant discourses which constructed a particular model of childhood in it. Further, it explains how these western conceptions are then exported and naturalized in the Indian context.

ECCD at the Global Level

The historical root of ECCD can be traced back to evidence that 'day care nurseries' and 'kindergartens' were present in the 19th century in most of Europe, America and in some of the majority world for care and educational purpose (Kamerman 2006). Drawing inspiration from the British infant school movement, infant schools for young children were started as a targeted intervention programme to combat crime and poverty in the cities in US. This was based on the assumption that 'these young, poor children be removed from the streets and placed in a setting where they could receive proper middle-class values and guidance' (Vinovskis 1996, pp. 103). In most European countries care and early education services slowly expanded after the Second World War in response to the growing female labour participation and the need for social safety programmes (Kamerman 2006).

However, the word ECCD took a centre stage and witnessed dramatic shift only after the Jomtien Declaration⁴ in the year 1990. Since then, ECCD has gained significant momentum and has been included in almost all the child centered conferences/discussions at the global level. Over the last two decades almost all the international level child-related policy briefs and background papers⁵ started emphasizing ECCD as the strong basis for human development and significant for country's human capital (Myers 1995; Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead 2009). In a normative sense, ECCD programmes are construed as powerful mechanisms to address various complex and persistent issues in society such as malnutrition, mortality and inequality, and ultimately aim

⁴ The world conference on Education for All (EFA) held at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and its subsequent declaration, which is now called as Jomtien declaration, have recognized that 'learning begins at birth'. It provided impetus to advocacy for ECCD programmes around the globe (UNESCO).

Accessed at http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-leadup/findings_ECCD1.shtm on 13th August, 2010.

⁵ For example, World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien 1990), World Summit for Children (1990), the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

to create a just and egalitarian society. This has been strongly justified with the help of developmental psychology and other empirical literatures that show that early years are crucial in human life and, early development is irreversible, it has recurring effects throughout the life cycle.

This argument was further supported by the child rights movement which envisages ECCD as every young child's right for holistic development (Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead 2009). Advocates of ECCD argue that early years are crucial in human life, therefore, investing in ECCD will reap not only benefits at the individual level but also at the aggregate level (Evans 1996; Arnold 2004). Individual level benefits are associated with school readiness, better cognitive development, freedom from sibling care responsibility, increased capabilities and human capital (Myers 1995). At the aggregate level, the ECCD Group has proposed eight different arguments for investment for long term societal gains through early intervention programmes (Bernard van Leer Foundation 1994). Some of the research institutions and non-profit organizations⁶ vehemently promoted this idea through conferences, workshops, publications and policy briefs.

In the ECCD literatures, two evaluation studies - Perry High Scope and the Abecedarian - are often referred to as a success story that needs to be replicated at the larger scale (Penn 2005). The High Scope Perry evaluation programme, which is claimed to be the first systematic evaluation study in the US conducted amongst low income African-American children living in poverty, reveals that effective early education programmes can produce short and long term effects (Schweinhart 2009). The Abecedarian longitudinal study, which also mainly involved disadvantaged black people, claims that good quality full-time care and education in the early years did produce long-term benefits (Penn 2005).

Though the ECCD programmes are, to a great extent, well established in the minority world, they are still in the evolutionary stage in most of the majority world. Followed by the success of US head-start programme, most of the countries in the majority world, where the technical and financial resources are scarce, have been suggested to use internationally designed programmes, either in the same or modified form. Assuming that children's needs are universal, the toolkit called 'developmentally appropriate practices', which was developed in the US (Bredenkamp 1987), have been recommended to the majority world as a panacea for children's learning and development (Penn 2002). This sort of scientific approach, which is mainly supported by research findings from developmental psychology and to some extent from neurosciences and genetics, is criticized by a few authors (Viruru 2001, Penn 2002). They argue that this kind of hegemonic approach has failed to recognize the cultural relevance, and thereby promotes globalization of childhood and undermines the legitimacy of people's knowledge and experiences in the majority world.

Penn (2002) in her article on '*The World Bank's View of ECCD*', which is at present promoting the ECCD agenda along with other donor agencies, criticized the Bank's current approach. She argues, on the one hand, that the Bank's neoliberal policies have had an adverse effect upon

⁶ For example, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Consultative Group on ECCD, World Bank and few other International Non-Governmental Organizations.

children's lives, particularly in the majority⁷ world. On the other hand, its ECCD approach which is highly 'technocratic' and 'human capital' centered largely ignores the structural casual factors while addressing the grave issues like malnutrition and malnourishment. Instead, it places greater responsibility on parents and family. The causes for malnourishment and malnutrition in the Bank's approach are mainly linked to inappropriate feeding and childcare practices. The Bank justifies its approach with the support of scientific empiricism and its faith on universalistic notion of child development.

What might be concluded from the above analysis is that the way the child has been conceptualized in policy with the use of dominant discourses such as 'problem child' 'poor child' 'scientific child' 'universal child' 'economic child' and so on (Moss and Petrie 2002, Dahlberg *et al.* 2007). It's necessary to mention here that, as a result of past colonial experience and present trend in globalization, the changes happening in the minority world have immense influence on deciding the policy outcomes of the majority world (Boyden 1990; Penn 2005). With that in mind, the paper now turns its focus on the Indian scenario.

ECCD in India

In India the institutions providing early childhood education were first established in the 19th century during the pre independence period (Swaminathan 1992). These institutions were primarily designed on the lines of British Infant Schools and Froebellian kindergartens and served the needs of British rulers and Indian elites (Verma 1994). Otherwise, for an ordinary child, the provision of childcare was mainly informal and provided within the family system or in extended kinships. Later, Maria Montessori's work in India spread the growth of early childhood education and has led to the establishment of training centers, particularly in the urban areas (Swaminathan 1992). Despite this effort, the reach of formal childcare provision and the concept of ECCD were very slow in India. The reason for slowness was attributed largely to elements like caste, strong family system and low status given to women in the society (Kamerman 2006).

After independence, the rationale for providing early childhood interventions emerged out of a need to protect children from the risk of poverty, to encourage women into the work force and to provide quality education for all sections of the society (Pattnaik 1996; Sharma *et al.* 2008). In 1975 the Indian Government started the 'Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)' scheme to provide comprehensive services mainly to the poor children aged between 0-6 years. ICDS is the only major, integrated programme for the young child that covers health, nutrition, early childhood care and pre-school education. The publicly funded and delivered ICDS programme was originally designed to combat child malnutrition. Strikingly, however, the country's budgetary commitments for public programmes has not been at the level as it was expected and, with the privatization of services, the scale and the quality of ECCD service provision in the country are largely polarized based on parental demands and affordability (Sareen 2005).

⁷ The ECCD group and other childhood literatures now increasingly use the term minority and majority world in place of developed and developing world. Countries from the developing world where the majority of children live are called majority world, and the countries of the developed world are called minority world. This proposal uses this terminology throughout this document.

Childcare provisions in India are now largely unregulated and scattered (Singh and Sood 2009). The last two decades have witnessed a large-scale privatization in early childhood service provision, where private service providers have emerged as the key players to meet the needs and aspirations of millions of middle class families (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2006). In a competing market environment ICDS has been struggling to attract even the marginalized communities from its own targeted areas (Prochner 2002). Moreover, learning English is widely believed that as a tool for future career success and, English medium education is valued even among poor families (M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation 2000).

The government-run ICDS programme, which receives most of its funding from the World Bank and other donor organizations, has adopted a 'life cycle approach' with its emphasis mainly on combating child malnutrition. Although preschool education is one of the components in the ICDS programme its non-formal pedagogical approach receives little attention in actual practice (Prochner 2002). On the contrary, private providers offer specialized formal learning mostly in English medium in their preschool education (Verma 1994). The type of services they offers significantly varies and, often they have been criticized by interest groups for their overemphasis on rote learning (Velayutham 2005). Significantly, in both public and private provisions the models of childhood practiced are mainly adopted from western developmental psychology. The present situation in India poses glaring challenges for ECCD service provision. The reason for this complexity could partly be attributed to colonial legacy and the supremacy of western knowledge in academics, which construct Indian childhood as 'other' (Nieuwenhuys 2009). As a result of continuous colonial rule and the integration of western ideas of childhood through globalization in the social, cultural and educational structures (Burman 1996), the country is now in search of its own childhood identity. Lack of description about Indian childhood offers great difficulty to provide a starting point for any academic analysis.

III

Construction in the Current Policy Documents and its Implications

An analysis of the ECCD policy documents shows that, the version of childhood that is represented in ICDS and in the position paper on Early Childhood Education (ECE) almost resonates with the global trend. The rationale for providing early childhood care and education in the position paper state

“The first 6 to 8 years of a child’s life.....the most critical years for lifelong developmentdevelopment in these years is extremely rapid..... if these early years are not supported by, or embedded in.....the chances of the child’s brain developing to its full potential are considerably, and often irreversibly, reduced.investing in these early years to ensure a sound foundation for life, which is not only the right of every child but which will also impact, in the long term, the quality of human capital available to a country” (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2006, pp 1)

Similarly, the revised concept note of ICDS project IV (2007) also claim

“given the fact that the early childhood years, that is, the first 6 years in the life of a child are critical, since growth and development is very rapid during this period, there is a need of an environment which is both supportive as well as stimulating” (pp 13)

Although there is a difference in defining the age for early childhood in ICDS and ECE, the underlying assumptions and the overall objective seems to be same i.e. achieving child development in the country. Early years in both the documents are recognized as crucial period for brain development and the justification for investing in early years also sounds similar to the international demand, that is, to multiply the country’s human capital and to meet MDG related goals. Both the documents maintain that they remain committed to achieve their objectives, though it varies slightly in focus. ICDS is committed

“to reduce child malnutrition through expansion of utilization of nutrition services and awareness and adoption of appropriate feeding and caring behaviors by the households of 0-6 years of age; and improve early child development outcomes and school readiness among children 3 to 6 years of age; in selected high burden districts/States” (ICDS - IV project, Revised Concept Note, 2007, pp 5)

It reaffirms the Government of India’s commitment to achieve child nutrition related MDG goals. In response to the growing demand, the programme also extends its commitment to achieve MDG goals related to comprehensive early childhood care and education mentioned in education for all (EFA) and universal primary education. On the other hand, the position paper on ECE envisage a policy shift that accept

“ECCE must be the first step in the educational ladder and should be a part of EFA” (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2006, pp vi)

The policy documents sounds promising to provide quality, fair and equitable access to programmes and acknowledge ECCD as basic right for every child. However, there is a conflict of interest in the policy domain. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002 which offers free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years did not include 0-6 years age group under its purview. The position paper on ECE did admit this with a concern.

In sum, the analysis gives a sense that the official construction of childhood in the policy totally resembles with the western psychological model of child development. India is no exception to this global trend. As Penn (2002) notes, the relationship between neuroscience and child development was systematically established over the period through scientific research, thus, this model of child development has unequivocally gained universal acceptance. It’s very hard for anyone to challenge or reject this connection unless and otherwise it is challenged through scientific research. As Viruru (2001) sees one cannot question science through informal knowledge, because, ‘scientific ways of knowing are privileged above all other ways’ (pp 11). Trying to decontextualise or challenge that scientific nexus is also beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, what this paper tries to do is to emphasize the need for understanding child

development and childhood through alternative perspective(s) for policy formulation. This is based on the conviction that there is no single way to look at child development or childhood, as there are competing models and theoretical frameworks that provide knowledge base for conceptualization. This will be explained in the following with specific reference to ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ and ‘play-based education’, which has also found unquestioning acceptance in the Indian ECCD policy documents.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and Play Based Education – This approach was stemmed out in the US in defence against the inclination toward formal learning in the 1980’s and in defence of informal, play based programmes for young children (Bredekamp 1987). Major emphasis in DAP was given to children’s learning experiences and environment. To this end, the position paper on DAP released in 1987 described what are considered as ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ practices in early childhood practice. Appropriate practices are justified mostly with the support of Piaget’s cognitive theories and in opposite the inappropriate practices are linked with the behaviourist model (Kessler 1991).

Ever since the term DAP has been introduced by NAEYC, it started to dominate the world in early childhood policy and practice. Within DAP, play was advocated as best method for children’s learning and development. This proposition has its theoretical foundation in Piaget’s self exploratory theory, which believes children are naturally motivated to explore their surroundings and in the process they interact with people and objects and make meaningful experiences. Children are advised to use workbooks, puzzles, flashcards, drawing materials for learning (Bredekamp 1987) and the demand was created in the market to design child-centered pedagogy. However, this approach has drawn criticisms from several quarters.

Firstly, the very notion of ‘development’ in DAP itself is being challenged from the post structuralist perspective. Burman (1995) sees, in any model of development, the process of development describes a ‘relational hierarchy, that is, with the more developed exhibiting those features the less developed lack (pp. 123). The term ‘development’ also implies that this is essentially a cultural construct. What may be seen as development to an individual or in a particular setting may not be seen as development to other individual or in other setting. Though DAP explains, with the help of child development theories, how children develop it fails to articulate what is counted as normal or optimum development (Woodhead 2006). Secondly, this approach was critiqued within and outside US for its cultural insensitivity. Some argue that since DAP was rooted in white, middle class perspectives, the recommendations made in the position paper keep few children in a privileged position and the rest in deprivation (Viruru 2001, Woodhead 2006). What is seen as child development and what are viewed as good for children’s life in the US are exported and normalized all over the world through DAP. For example, Woodhead (2006) observe, use of books, worksheets, drawings and puzzle in an early childhood setting can be a taken for granted situation in the minority world, but it has huge financial, social and cultural implications in the majority world. The revised version of position paper on DAP did admit this and acknowledge the importance of social and cultural context in children’s learning and development (Bredekamp and Copple 1997). Nevertheless, in India it seems this model has attained an unquestionable status in the policy document. The financial viability and cultural relevance of extrapolating this model has never been questioned in the policy documents. An example to this effect can be found in the following paragraph, which read

“The play area should be appropriate for explorative activities and for gaining mastery over physical competencies. Playing on a jungle gym and spending time in walking and balancing areas will help children gain confidence. Running, jumping, and balancing are necessary for 3–5-year-olds. Free play can be both indoors as well as outdoors. Outdoor play is more beneficial for the development of gross motor skills while indoor free play such as beading, peg boards, and puzzles is largely beneficial for the development of small-muscle skills. Mechanical toys are helpful in enhancing fine motor skills (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2006, pp 41)

In a context where most of the private institutions and ICDS Anganwadi centres are functioning with limited resources it looks so ambitious trying to imitate those western practices, that are, playing on a jungle gym, outdoor play and mechanical toys, into the Indian set up. This paper does agree that children go through tremendous pressure in the formal teaching mostly in the private nursery schools and those practices are against the developmental needs of the child (Prochner 2002). But what this paper does not agree and tries to examine is the way these global concepts are accepted and normalized in a wholehearted manner irrespective of its cultural relevance. For instance, there are contentions on play based approaches. Viruru (2001) suggest play is one way, not the only right way that children can learn. She further argues, play based education is essentially a western concept that they can perceive as a means to achieve the western ideals of autonomy, self-reliance and democratic values. Tobin views this kind of practices in the early childhood institution as promotion of consumer culture among children in the postmodern, postcolonial society (Tobin 1997 cited in Viruru 2001). Although, play-based education has western and Indian source, Prochner (2002) observes, in practice it has got little support in India.

Finally, DAP was criticized for its failure to articulate its knowledge content. While situating the debate on appropriate versus inappropriate practices within the broad field of curriculum studies, Kessler (1991) argues DAP can explain how children develop, but it cannot explain what to teach. This is basically a curriculum question and this question can be answered by answering another philosophical question: ‘what knowledge is of most worth?’ (Kessler 1991, pp 185). The history of curriculum suggest that there is always been different interest groups fighting for a set of values. Seen in this light, she concludes, appropriate versus inappropriate practices as a fight between two different philosophical positions in that nobody can claim superior over other.

Conclusion

Without doubt, adults in the society wield immense power and control over children. Children’s time and space (Ennew 1994), everyday life and social experiences (James and Prout 1990; James *et al.* 1998) are structured by adults’ perception of what children are and what children should be. It can be seen from the above analysis that the current model of child development, which is mainly Euro-American centric and informs the global policy community, exercise great deal of authority and silences the voices of children, particularly the voices of majority world children. In contrast, there has been a growing concern among scholars to understand how children themselves construct meaning of their childhood and to study how far they effectively

use their agency in a highly adult-structured society. So, it's time to recognize in the policy that, children are no more passive recipients, they are active agents and their voices should be heard in matters affecting their lives.

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