



A Comparative Insight into Early Childhood Education Policies of South and Southeast Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

The current study presents a policy analysis of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in six countries namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. It addressed three basic questions. What are the core areas in ECCE policies and how these areas are addressed? What challenges are faced by the countries in implementation of the policies? Using thematic content analysis policy documents, curriculum frameworks, international reports and journal articles, the research identified the following core areas access, equity and inclusion, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training, health and nutrition, parental involvement, governance, funding and monitoring. The cohesiveness of the policy varies across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal due to difference in governance, monitoring, funding and teacher competency. Malaysia has shown a better ECCE framework implementation due to centralized system. Findings reveal need for mutual collaboration networks with proper mechanism for action plan development. Funding or investments may be enhanced as it is the best ever investment made in humans' life. The research will contribute in building a regional effort for achieving education for all and recommends interventions in training, curriculum, core areas, investments for making ECCE more equitable and inclusive.

Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is very important for the holistic development of the children, especially those from the marginalized communities. It is highlighted in the sustainable development goals 4.2, which aims to ensure that all should have equal access to quality early

childhood care education in order to prepare them for the primary education.(UNESCO,2016).It covers the age of 3-8 years normally in the formal setup. UNESCO see it as 0-8 years. For the purpose of ease we will focus on academic early childhood and care education in south Asia and Southeast Asia. It can be one of the finest investments to promote holistic development, social coherence and gender equality. As per report of UNESCO about 60% of the children in low economic countries don't have access to early childhood care and education, so the process of transformation through education must begin with ECE.

Countries in south Asia and South east Asia are highly committed to impart ECCE. They diverse landscape of the countries in these regions has a critical role having certain opportunities and challenges. For the purpose of ease only Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal and Malaysia is discussed. However the region faces multiple problems due to inadequate policy provisions, poor infrastructure, and socio-economic development. Governments as well as non-state actors have also recognized the ECCE as being part of profitable investment to lessen the future disparities and social mobility (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). The ECCE Landscape in South and Southeast Asia is diverse and customized according to their sociopolitical context.

In south Asia countries like Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh have institutionalized ECCE through educational policies. However despite various initiatives the outcomes cannot be achieved due to underfunding, fragmented policy implementation, particularly in remote or underserved areas (Britto et al., 2017). Regional collaborations like SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) and ARENEC (Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood) is an excellent platform to share the best practices among these countries.

Access to ECCE and equity is the first among main core of policy provisions. That means that ECCE must be available to all pre -primary children particularly those from the marginalized communities disparities in different countries do exist based on certain demographic factors. These inequalities are discussed through various interventions like community based interventions, mobile schools and homeschooling.

Second area pf concern in ECCE is the quality of provisions available. Various issues have been highlighted such as no standard curriculum, poor infrastructure, untrained teachers and low quality learning material. As in Bangladesh much effort has been done to scale up the teacher training programmes but developed countries on the other hand ensures the quality of training provided (UNESCO, 2016).

One important thing is that the development of ECCE also need coordination between different ministries to ensure the maximum benefit is gained. Like ministry of Education, Health and Social welfare can all coordinate to produce better outcomes in Pakistan Ministry of Education and Professional Training ,Planning ,Development and Special Initiatives, Women Development ,Social Welfare and Special Education are involved (Shams. A et al ., 2023). So ministries involved for a single task lead to inefficiency and duplication of task (Britto et al., 2017).

In order to provide high quality early childhood care and education highly quality trained teachers are an essential prerequisite. It has been recognized globally with the introduction of ECCE programs both in service and pre service training of the teachers. In Pakistan this provision is available across many universities of the public sector. In Qualified and well-supported teachers are vital for high-quality ECCE. Several countries have recognized this by introducing pre-service

and in-service teacher training programs. Developed countries has made it mandatory to have a basic bachelor degree in ECCE and certifications along with that where as in low income countries teachers often get minimal pay, training and don't know clear pathways even after choosing ECCE (Yoshikawa et al., 2018).

Some organizations like UNESCO and ARENEC play an important role in building the policy of the region. They provide support through professional development of the ECCE teachers and providing the basic framework for monitoring and evaluation. In this way the standards are harmonized through a single platform and it is easier to access the data and monitor the data and get the feedback to inform the policy formulation for improvement. System Approach for Better Education Results -Early Childhood Education (SABR-ECD) is an initiative by the world bank to improve ECCE through policy analysis and providing road map for the implementation (World Bank, 2016). These programmes have helped Pakistan to select potential areas of investment for ECCE (Neuman & Devercelli, 2020).

Despite growing momentum, several systemic challenges hinder the full realization of ECCE goals in South and Southeast Asia. First, financing remains a critical barrier. While high-income countries like Singapore invest substantially in ECCE (up to 1.2% of GDP), low-income countries often allocate less than 0.1%, limiting program expansion and quality improvement (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). Second, monitoring and evaluation systems are either absent or underdeveloped in many countries, making it difficult to assess program impact and guide policy adjustments.

Third, inclusive education for children with disabilities or special needs remains under-prioritized. In many countries, ECCE policies do not systematically incorporate inclusive pedagogies or support services, despite commitments to equity (Britto et al., 2017). Finally, parental engagement and community participation, although recognized as crucial, are inconsistently implemented across programs, often due to cultural or logistical barriers.

In summary, the ECCE policy landscape across South and Southeast Asia is dynamic and evolving. While many countries have made significant strides in expanding access and formalizing early childhood programs, challenges related to equity, quality, and implementation persist. The diversity of political, economic, and cultural contexts in the region demands tailored, yet coordinated policy responses. As the global community continues to emphasize early childhood education as a cornerstone for sustainable development, countries in South and Southeast Asia have a unique opportunity to build resilient, inclusive, and high-quality ECCE systems. Regional collaboration, evidence-based policymaking, and sustained investment will be key to achieving this vision.

Research Questions

1. What are the core areas of ECCE policies in each of the five countries?
2. How these policies address these core areas in their ECCE policies?
3. What are common challenges regarding ECCE implementation in the region?

Rationale of the study

Early childhood is the critical stage in human's life as there is rapid brain development in these years. ECCE is one of the most fruitful investments on human capital. As these early year

experiences will shape the future of the child later. In order to achieve sustainable development goal 4.2 countries in south Asia and South East Asia have worked on their ECCE policies but how these policies are framed, integrated and implemented vary across countries due to varying socio-economic conditions, governance and monitoring and Inclusivity. Mostly the literature on ECCE focused on outcomes of the ECCE but only limited studies provide the cross national comparison of core themes that can inform the policy. By examining the ECCE policies and related documents in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal and Malaysia. This study addresses the research gap. These countries share commonalities like history, developmental status and socio-economic background. Comparative analysis will help to dig into the fact what is done? What need to be done? And what successful practices may be adopted or adapted as per contextual needs?

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the study is to compare early childhood and education policies across six countries of southeast and south Asia. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal and Malaysia. How the critical core areas have been discussed in various policies across six countries have been analyzed. Policy documents and thematic content analysis was used to gain insights to understand the structure and precedence areas of the ECCE policies across these countries. Ultimately the aim of the study is to inform the future endeavour towards policy making of ECCE by crucial identification of regional challenges and highlighted patterns.

Significance of the Study

By comparing the core areas of access, equity, inclusion, teacher training, curriculum, funding and governance. This study highlights challenges and better practices in south Asians and South East Asian countries. It will be beneficial to policy makers, leaders or heads of ECCE institutions, teacher training programmes and educators. It's contributes to build a regional equitable ECCE system in low socio economic countries that is more integrated and top notch quality.

Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to six countries in south and south East Asia. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Srilanka and Malaysia. It is limited to the government policies and frameworks for ECCE that were easily accessible in English. Further only the core themes of access, equity and inclusion, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training, health and nutrition, parental involvement, governance, funding and monitoring.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Care and Education in South Asia presents a multifarious landscape, defined by diverse socio-economic contexts, cultural shades, and varying levels of government preferences. The historical context of education in south Asia is shaped by colonial legacy ,socio political context and resources scarcity that influence the structure and function of the public school system (Shallwani, 2018). Notably south Asia is having one-fourth of the global population, yet it exhibit significant educational disparities and highest poverty rates due to unemployment. In this context the role of education in societal progress and economic growth of the region can not be undermined (Kaur, 2022). The transformative role played by early childhood education in fostering holistic development of the child and loading them with the skills that are necessary to navigate through the global landscape cannot be denied. Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs are necessary for providing sustainable learning ,making them an essential element of

the educational policy worldwide. Financing early childhood education is an agency to reduce the inequality and better outcomes for the future (Sayre et al., 2015). Children who has an opportunity to go through the ECE performs better in all other developmental stages of the childhood as compare to the children who don't (Mahnaz & Kiran, 2024a).

Early Childhood Education (ECE) pertains to the organized and deliberate delivery of learning experiences from birth to eight years old, with particular emphasis on the preschool years (ages 3–5). These experiences can occur in formal, non-formal, or informal settings and aim to promote holistic development—cognitive, physical, social, and emotional—during the most formative stage of human life (UNESCO, 2022). ECE is widely recognized as a critical foundation for lifelong learning and development. The early years are characterized by rapid brain development, where neural connections are formed at a faster rate than at any other time in life. Quality ECE programs stimulate this development by offering enriching learning environments that foster curiosity, creativity, and foundational academic skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Other than the cognition, ECE holds a decisive role in fostering social and emotional skills like resilience, discipline, empathy, coordination, cooperation. These skills strengthen not only interpersonal relations but also helps to adapt successfully the school environment (OECD, 2017). Research indicates that quality of ECE programs is directly related to the high academic performance, higher tendency of graduation. In the long run these individuals can better contribute to the economy of the country (Mahnaz & Kiran, 2024b).

Moreover ECE is an equalizer that serves to give an advantage to the marginalized communities providing them with better opportunities. It works to alleviate the poverty, promote health and provides access to resources for all ensuring that all children are given the privilege to take benefit of a healthier beginning (UNICEF, 21019). It is like investing in building the society, if we invest in nurturing these little minds with love and care they will certainly bloom into the beautiful and progressive future of the society. As such, it is not only a personal investment but also a societal one. The economic returns of early education are greater as there is no remedial service needed and is more beneficial in terms of outcomes if properly implemented. Acknowledging the varied performance of ECE, it has been given preference in the global agendas. Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 states that all countries must ensure that every child must have an access to quality ECE programmes in order to be prepared for the pre-primary education (United Education, 2015). ECE is pivotal for holistic development of the child, promoting inclusion and reducing disparities thus building a coherent society.

Global Recognition of Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has acquired strength being a fundamental human right and a milestone for sustainable development. Various international organization like UNESCO, UNICEF and United Nations have emphasized the need for quality early childhood education. It is very important for the lifelong learning. The brain of the child is like a sponge that has the ability to absorb all the new experiences and learning that are exposed to this. Now the later life of the child that his emotional, physical, intellectual development depends on what types of experiences has been absorbed as they impact on lifelong learning?

The commitment that the world has shown is evident in form development goals of sustainability. Referring to target 4.2 of SDG 4, draws attention towards ensuring that all girls and boys have equal access to quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) in order to prepare them for

upcoming primary education.(United Nations , 2015). This target develops an accord that ECE is necessary not only for the readiness for school but also for the broad term educational and social outcomes.

UNESCO acknowledges ECE as a key component for providing inclusive and equitable education. The Global Education Monitoring Survey (GEM) calls for including the provisions in the policy guidelines for a balanced early childhood education (UNESCO, 2022).

UNICEF visualizes it as the most cost-effective and “once in a lifetime”, an opportunity that shapes not only child’s potential and promote the equity in child's education (UNICEF, 2019).

In a nutshell, national policy guidelines have been greatly influenced by the recognition of the international agencies, which is clearly evident in SDG 4.2 and supported by UNESCO and UNICEF. It reinforces the fact that early childhood investment is both strategically and morally necessary for inclusive growth and the development of human capital.

Regional Context: Early Childhood Education in South and Southeast Asia

Globally South and South east Asia have world’s most youthful population highlighting the fact that early childhood education programmes must be an important part of strategic planning of countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Malaysia and Nepal.

In south east Asia swift population growth, urbanization, and social injustice has compelled the government to acknowledge Early Childhood Education, a way to curb the effects of social inequalities. As per reports of UNICEF (2023), more than 625 children reside in south Asia, with most of them facing challenges to early learning primarily due to poverty, gender expectations and geographical positioning. In Bangladesh, initiatives like Child Daycare Centre Act 2021, tend to formalize ECCE, but there are lot of challenges in implementation (World Bank, 2022). India has ECE as basic component of National Educational Policy (2020). Conversely, Pakistan faces difficulties with an incoherent policy provisions and limited government funding for ECE, despite some progress through provincial initiatives and advocacy efforts (UNICEF ROSA, 2022). Meanwhile, in Nepal, the government has embraced a community-centered strategy, officially recognizing Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers in both policy frameworks and practical application, though there is limited regulatory oversight over private facilities (World Bank, 2022).

The Association of Southeast Asians Nations (ASEAN) declaration of 2023 depicted a strong commitment to a collective effort for quality improvement, access, Inclusivity in Early Childhood Care and Education across the region (ASEAN, 2023). At the global level, Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 calls for ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that children are willing for primary education by 2030 (United Nations, 2015) Organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF continue to support these efforts by providing policy guidance, technical assistance, and data monitoring systems.

In summary, while considerable progress has been made across these five countries, disparities in funding, governance, and service delivery highlight the need for sustained policy attention and regional cooperation to ensure equitable and high-quality early learning experiences for all children.

Disparities, progress and Policy Interventions

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is instrumental in lifelong learning and holistic development in south Asia and south east Asia. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, India, Malaysia Have various policy provisions and different programs implementation for the development of ECE. But significant disparities exist various systems due to various issues or challenges that exist within the system of the countries and region as a whole. In Bangladesh various steps have been taken to promote early childhood education like Child Daycare Centre Act 2021, committed to bring child care services under institutional policies for the children aged 4 months to 6 years Though the challenges exist in providing equity specially in rural areas. A research on comparison of Bangladesh and Pakistan, highlighted that inspite of having the policy provisions there is a considerable gap due to disparity in socio-economic status. These disparities affect not only health and nutritional outcomes but also affects the critical stage of early childhood development (Mahnaz & Kiran, 2024c).

India's National Education Policy 2020 lays stress on that by 2030 every child at the age of 3-6 years will be admitted to school. The focus of the early childhood care and education is to prepare the child for grade 1 through the play way and Gamified learning method. The children lack readiness to school due to poor quality of teaching methods at various schools (Ministry of Education India, 2020). Too much focus on the academic outcomes has significantly reduced the play time hence compromising the holistic development of child in ECCE. National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has advised syllabus for 0-3 years and 3-8 years. Mid-day meals and health checkups were also suggested in the policy. Anganwadi centers have been strengthened by the policy provision to provide health, nutrition and education -a comprehensive package for the families. Strength of policy is contextualized curriculum for each state prepared by NCERT. Research shows that despite such strong policy provisions children from low socio-economic backgrounds are not very desirable of learning in primary schools due to poor socio economic condition and less educated parents (Choudhury et al., 2023). ECCE landscape in Pakistan is split into various fragments mainly due to less attention given to this sector. ECE in Pakistan always remain underfunded. As suggested by the UNICEF (2023) at least 10% of the budget must be allocated to ECE because lack of funding is the primary reason of not up scaling the ECE in Pakistan. Though ECCE centers have been established in Sindh and Punjab the provision of importance to ECCE in overall Pakistan is still a challenge. In provinces like Balochistan where literacy rate and development of infrastructure is a challenge the provision of ECCE is very challenging yet desirable for the development of early childhood program nationwide. A study from Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey indicates that malnutrition and improper care practices affects badly the child holistic development in ECCE (Akram et al., 2024). Various programmes in Pakistan with the cooperation of UNICEF are in Progress like School Health and Nutrition Program that is designed to provide health guidelines and nutritional services for school aged children. Still lack of strategic planning , coordination among various sectors and increase in funding is required for a better outcome of ECCE.

Malaysia has well developed ECE system, majorly known as "TASKA" for under four years aged children and "TADIKKA" for 4-6 years. Ministry of Education, Women, Family and Community Development is involved to ensure the maximum benefit of the policy. Socio-Economic skills and resilience are focused (Jais & Ishak, 2024). However, differences exist in urban and rural context and among various income brackets, necessitating targeted interventions and ensuring equitable access (Ismail et al., 2023).An emergent area of strength is education through STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) that is incorporated into the ECE model. It nurtures critical thinking and creativity skills among children (Noor & Sulaiman, 2023).

Nepal has a community based approach towards ECE. Childhood development centers have been suggested in the policy provisions. Research indicates that children from less privileged areas like Dalit, face various challenges in accessing quality early childhood education programmes, indicating a need of more equitable and inclusive programme for ECE (Nganga et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Care and Education serve as a pillar for lifelong learning and holistic development of the child. Only through high quality ECCE programme, readiness for the pre-school, reduction in drop out and better cognition, socio-emotional growth can be ensured for the children. But the set target can only be achieved when communities, organizations, educators all collaborate with government to invest in an accessible, inclusive and equitable programme for all. In order to ensure that every child has an equal access to thrive in the pool of ECCE adequate teacher training, infrastructure, material resources and an increase in investment on ECCE must be ensured. It is not a privilege rather a basic human right to ascertain and inclusive and progressive society in future.

Methodology

Research Design

This research has adopted a qualitative approach with descriptive design to investigate the ECCE policies of the selected countries. The descriptive design was chosen for in depth examination and interpretation of ECCE policies across different countries, enabling it to understand how the policies are framed and implemented across different contexts. The study focused on content and themes present in ECCE policies of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal and Malaysia, aiming to highlight the core themes and challenges across these countries.

Data Collection

Data was collected through document analysis of ECCE government policies of the respective countries, UNESCO and World Bank ECCE reviews, international reports and journal articles. The content was selected based on its authenticity of the source and accessibility. Purposive sampling was used to select the countries based on common economic, social and regional characteristics.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. Comparative matrix was developed to compare the findings across selected countries. The analysis begins with repeated reading of the policy documents to ensure that the terminologies and context of ECCE across the selected countries is clearly understood. The similarities, differences and implementation gaps were more clearly visible after the matrix development. Themes were developed both deductively and inductively.

Results

The findings of the study are based on the thematic content analysis of ECCE policies and documents related to these policies. The findings discuss three basic research questions.

Core Policy Areas in Early Childhood Education Policies

In all the policies some basic core themes identified are as follows:

1. Access ,equity and inclusion
2. curriculum and pedagogy
3. teacher training and qualification
4. Health and Nutrition
5. finance and budget allocation
6. monitoring and evaluation
7. Intersectoral coordination

These areas are taken into consideration by the countries of Pakistan, India, Srilanka, Nepal Bangladesh and Malaysia. Although the context varies across various nations.

Policy Approaches to Core ECCE Areas

Although all the five countries consider ECCE as an foundational pillar of holistic development which is necessary for lifelong learning yet the way their vision is translated into actionable plans varies across nations. This study explored how these themes are translated .A cross country comparison matrix is given in the Appendix -A.

Access, Equity and Inclusion

Pakistan prioritizes ECCE in 2017 policy but implementation is very low, rural urban disparity, conflict zones, gender disparity still exists. There are no proper infrastructure preschools in far flung areas that further affect the enrollment. Inclusion policies are not implemented they remain confined to the papers.

Bangladesh targets all children till 8 for ECCE .The main aim of the education is preprimary school readiness for the children. However disparities in various regions and heavy reliance on NGOS' are the problem. Basically the ECCE policies aim to retain maximum number of children in primary education.

India NEP 2020 proposed universalization of 3-6 years ECCE by 2030 with Anganwadi centers .However due to quality of education and various issues access still exists.

Nepal School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023) calls for one year pre-primary education for all. However due to geographical barrier, rural urban disparity, poor infrastructure and facilities and caste based barriers equity cannot be achieved.

Srilanka has shown improvement in access to ECCE through private and government institutions, especially in urban areas though the rural areas still face some problem. Moreover about 84% of Early childhood Development centers are either under non-government organizations or private institutions.

Malaysia has one of the strongest ECCE models, with ECCE programs under different ministries with a much wider coverage nationwide.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Pakistan policy of ECCE has planned a curriculum for holistic development build around seven core areas language and literacy, basic mathematics, health, hygiene and safety, physical development and creative arts, general knowledge. Bangladesh focuses cognitive development, language and moral values. India ECCE curriculum is play based; multi lingual and culturally relevant learning is emphasized. Nepal ECCE curriculum favour mother tongue for basic instruction and focuses the holistic development of the child. It focuses on active learning. Sri Lanka curriculum is based on core areas of health nutrition, language development and social behaviour. It has a structured curriculum that prepares the children for primary school. Malaysia has adopted the preschool standards set for the curriculum by the government of Malaysia.

It focuses on holistic development with focus on problem solving, critical thinking, and values. The curriculum is activity based.

Teacher Training and Curriculum

In Pakistan teachers of ECCE has no tailored training for early childhood. Pre-service training is not provided however some of the training is provided in-service. In Bangladesh least 35% of teachers are ECCE trained Education WATCH, 2019). However most of these teachers are from non-government sectors only 58.3 % of teachers are trained in government sectors. In Nepal only 7% of the teachers use skills acquired through training in their classroom practices. Sri Lanka also requires certification or diploma for ECCE. Malaysian Education Blueprint gives benchmarks for performance. Diploma qualification is mandatory for ECCE.

Health and Nutrition

In Pakistan Health and Nutrition service is provided via various provincial programmes in collaboration with health department. A good framework is there but implementation is weak in areas specially rural or remote areas. In India ICDS (Integrated child development services) provides free health checkups and nutrition services. In Bangladesh ministry of primary and mass education and NGOs collaboratively responsible for providing nutritional services. In Nepal the programme is on way but is very much underfunded. Srilanka provides regular screening health checkups and immunization for care. While Malaysia displays a most comprehensive model with proper hygiene education and healthy meals in ECCE centers.

Parental and Community Engagement

Pakistan and Nepal lays stress on parental involvement but due to awareness the gaps exists. India policy guidelines focuses the involvement of parents at educational sessions. Srilanka favour the community involvement in management of ECCE centers to make it more sustainable. While a proper structure of parental involvement is there in Malaysia regarding key decisions in ECCE.

Governance, monitoring and Financing

Inter sectoral coordination is there in each of the selected countries of south Asia and south east Asia monitoring mechanisms are also there but except in Malaysia the framework is not strong. The ECCE policy of India also calls for state level monitoring with national monitoring and evaluation. In Pakistan KPK and Punjab are predominantly better in monitoring.

All the countries addresses core areas in their policies but Malaysia and Srilanka are better in implementation then others. Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal have the policy provisions but non structured framework for implementation had made it harder to gain the real outcomes.

Implementation Challenges Across The Region

Inspite of the strong policy provisions implementation challenges are faced by the countries due to various problems like under funding in the ECCE in form of GDP as well as rural urban disparities, Non-professionalism of ECCE teachers that lead to more student drop out, Governance is not well coordinated .involvement of various sectors often duplicates and the outcome remains fragmented due to lack of collaboration between various ministries. Poor monitoring and evaluation of the running programmes is another cause.

Discussions

This section will highlight the findings of thematic content analysis of ECCE policies of south and south east Asia Countries Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Srilanka and Malaysia keeping in view the research questions. The analysis revealed that all six countries encompass the six core areas in their national policies. It reflects alignment of the regional ECCE policies with sustainable development goal 4.2 that calls for universal access to early childhood education (UNESCO,2021). Malaysia and Srilanka have more impactful and centralized vision which is the result of good governance that leads to high quality of ECCE (Rahman & Nurani, 2022).On the contrary Pakistan, India and Nepal have ston policy frameworks but implementation action plan is very weak. Arora & Singhal(2021) attributes this to fragmented ECCE delivery. Bangladesh has shown a progress Inspite of being a lower middle country.Through its pre-primary operational framework and involvement of non-state actors (Kumar & Sravanthi, 2023). However ECE for 0-3 is still following regional pattern.

The research has confirmed the shared core thematic areas across all countries. That is access, equity and inclusion, health and nutrition, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training, governance, funding and monitoring. However the policy provision depth and operational details varies significantly. There is a visible gap in policy and practice in the countries .So the intent is different from the round reality in form of actual delivery in the classroom. As India's policy advocates for universal access to ECCE but the mechanism of inter sectoral coordination is unclear (Gosh,2023).

The major challenges identified are untrained low capacity of the ECCE educators. As pointed earlier by Kaga et al (2021) most countries have not specialized ECCE trainers. Nepal and Pakistan have limited finance (Nawaz & Aziz, 2020). A gap exists in access and quality, in marginalized areas (Shrestha, 2021).

An expected finding is strong policy in Nepal despite limited financial resources. SSDP suggests that strategic integration of ECCE is also essential rather than mere finances for a more coherent action plan of policy. Bangladesh's rapid expansion through NGO's in rural and marginalized areas is also praise worthy. It has challenged the narrative that only government led ECCE models can be successful (Kumar & Sravanthi, 2023). This analysis has shaped the understanding of ECCE policies and has given new insights. Policy provision do not ensures the implementation pathways. Without proper action plan for implementation, strong governance even best policies remain ineffective. Integration of ECCE across various areas of child holistic development is essential. The countries which have integrated themes of health and nutrition in ECCE framework have

better outcomes in education (Malaysia and Srilanka). NGOs can play a significant role in development of ECCE in Bangladesh. But non state actors come with their own agendas which need to be monitored as they often contradict the basic philosophy of the country.

Recommendations

Based on findings and discussions following recommendations are made to strengthen ECCE in the south Asia and South east Asian regions.

1. Prioritization may be given to rural, marginalized conflict hit areas. Low income families, excluded castes and remote areas accessibility may be ensured by more coherent policy frameworks.
2. The qualification of ECCE educators may be upgraded to certification and diploma followed by bachelors in ECCE.
3. Pre service and in service training need to be provided on play based methods, critical inquiry and inclusive education. Health and nutrition may be catered in the training as an essential component.
4. Rather than specific subjects broader learning areas may be given to allow the educator to frame the curriculum as per need of the learner.
5. Life skills may be a part of the curriculum along with environmental education, moral and ethical values.
6. Curriculum may be designed as per need of the locals rather than mere global trends. Language of instruction may be mother tongue to gain maximum output.
7. Mechanism for action for inter sectoral coordination may be planned. Public private partnership may be enhanced with strong regulation by the government to ensure the consistency in provision of the service.
8. Models from Malaysia may be adapted as it is more integrated than other ECCE policies.
9. National ECCE dashboards based on core competency areas may be developed for keeping a record and track of ECCE benchmarks.
10. Monitoring and evaluation networks may be strengthened and may be supported by community based feedback to enhance the transparency.
11. Funding may be increased specially on health and nutrition, teacher training, infrastructure development, provision of quality material and programmes for ECCE.
12. Mobile based parent and community involvement may be encouraged in remote areas to ensure parental involvement. Parent teacher associations may be strengthened by awareness sessions.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study were it was limited to document of government for ECCE. Not all the government has updated ECCE documents. Only the content available in English was included. The themes were subjectively interpreted. Stakeholders' perspectives were not taken. Results are generalizable to specific context of the countries.

Conclusion

The study aimed at exploring the core thematic areas in ECCE policies of south east Asia and south Asian countries namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Srilanka, Nepal, Srilanka and Malaysia. Thematic analysis of the policy documents with implementation reports, curricular frameworks and previous researches the study identified the common and diverse patterns across ECCE policies concepts, delivery and implementation. Although it's a foundation pillar of the child's life, the depth of meaning of ECCE varies across various nations. Malaysia and Srilanka have more centralized governance, and monitoring, well developed teacher training and more cohesive framework. While other countries face problems in implementation due to poor access, low funding and investments, fragmented governance and monitoring. The strengths of the regional policies are the increased focus on ECCE, community involvement, curricular reforms and involvement of the core areas as per need of the developmental phase. However gaps are there in providing ECC for 0-3 years. Teacher autonomy may be increased provided that the competency of the teacher is according to the needs of the ECCE. Environmental sensitivity is missing from the curricula which need to be inculcated in the little minds.

In nut shell we can say that Political involvement in providing quality ECCE, sustainable funding and investments and coordination will ensure high quality ECCE. Outreach plan for ECCE must be inclusive in nature and these countries needs to focus on professional development capacity of the existing ECCE workforce because they are shaping the future of the nations. In short no child must be deprived of early childhood care and education because the pathways and mechanisms developed at this age will sustain throughout the life.

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