

# Strategies in Training of ECCE Professionals through Distance Education

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**Abstract :** *This paper focuses on the Diploma programme on Early Childhood Care and Education, developed and implemented by the Indira Gandhi National Open University. The authors describe the status of childhood care and education in the country, and the need for such a programme offered at a distance. The programme design and development, implementation including practicals and projects, and the need for a forum for networking of ECCE professionals and their professional development have been discussed.*

## Introduction

The crucial importance of the early childhood years in the context of life span development is, by now, a globally acknowledged fact. The large amount of research in Child Development, the world over, unambiguously underlines one fact — that the rate of development is more rapid during the early years of life and that the child is highly susceptible to both favourable as well as unfavourable experiences. Recognizing the significance of early childhood years assumes even greater importance in the content of the under-privileged children in developing countries. Poverty by itself initiates a cycle of deprivation and early childhood care and education (ECCE) services have been known to reverse many of its negative consequences on the child.

It is also well established that the dream of universalization of primary education cannot be turned into a reality unless it is supported by measures, that provide to the child during the crucial early childhood years, an environment that facilitates optimum development. Such an environment would provide love, nurture and a variety of stimulating experiences, right from infancy through preschool years.

By providing ECCE services to the children under six years of age, adults and the girl children of school going age, who are normally involved in the full time care of the young child, can be freed for taking up employment and attending school, respectively. The *National Policy on Education (1986)* states "Recognising the holistic nature of child development, viz. nutrition, health and social, mental, physical, moral and emotional development, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) will receive high priority..."

ECCE services refer to an integrated packages of services that fulfil the child's basic needs of health care, supplementary feeding, stimulation and learning, and affection and nurture. Within its purview would come the creche services provided to children under three years of age; the preschool education services and day care facilities for preschoolers; and the modalities and methods of curriculum transaction in classes I and II. In the Indian context, ECCE services are provided both through the government and the voluntary sector. The components of ECCE — health, nutrition, stimulation and preschool education — are often provided together through a single programme but equally, sometimes each of these components is provided separately, depending upon the objectives of the programme/organization providing the services. For example, many privately run play schools/nursery schools largely concentrate on the preschool education component of the ECCE.

### **Relevance of Training Programmes for ECCE Professionals**

When examining the quality of inputs provided to the child in the various ECCE centres that are operative in the country, it becomes evident that most ECCE centres — whether privately run or those functioning under the government programmes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme — function more as downward extensions of primary schools, where the teaching of the 3 R's assumes the utmost importance at the cost of developmental activities. In fact, what needs to be done is exactly the opposite. The development of young children must be fostered through play activities. In terms of preparing the preschooler for formal schooling, the play based activity and child centered approach should create the general readiness and focus on *pre-reading pre-writing* and *pre-arithmetic* skills — instead of the 3 R's. In fact, the play based and the child-centered approach needs to be extended to class I and II as well.

The *National Policy on Education (1986)* advocates “Programmes of ECCE will be child centred, focused around play and the individuality of the child. Formal methods and the introduction of the 3 R's will be discouraged at this state.” Thus, whether it is in the context of re-orientation of the functionaries already employed in the national child development programme like the ICDS and other ECCE centres (government or private), or whether it is in the context of training of the hitherto untrained or those who are freshly appointed as ECCE workers, it is quite clear that *training is one of the crucial areas of intervention* if we wish to upgrade the quality of ECCE programmes. These aspects ‘highlighted till now’ are equally valid to the situation of ECCE services in the developing countries in the region.

The *Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education* launched by the School of Continuing Education of IGNOU was designed in response to the realization widely gaining ground that there was a need to train/retrain people desirous of working/already working in the various ECCE programmes, both in the private and the government sector, as regards sound practices. This assumed greater significance in context of mushrooming of privately run nursery schools/preschools/play schools in almost every nook and corner of the country. One needs trained people with the right perspective about ECCE to work in centres for children. Programmes like this Diploma programme

of IGNOU would, over a period of time, contribute to building a network of trained and committed ECCE workers.

What then are the competencies that need to be developed in a person wanting to take up a career involving young children? The ECCE professionals need to imbibe the knowledge, attitudes and skills that will enable them to sensitively tune in to each child's needs and respond to the individuality of each child in what is essentially a group situation.

The ECCE worker needs to have a sound *knowledge base* regarding:

- growth and development of children
- preventive and curative aspects of health care during the early years
- changing nutritional requirements during early childhood
- using the play way approach for providing stimulation during infancy and the pedagogy of imparting preschool education
- organizing and managing centres for children.

In their *attitudes* they need to develop:

- a sensitivity to the uniqueness and individuality of each child
- a flexibility in their approach
- a child-centeredness in all their activities.

They need to acquire the *skills* of:

- interacting with children
- planning and conducting age appropriate play activities
- guiding 'childrens' "discoveries" and "explorations" unobtrusively
- interacting and communicating with the parents and the community.

Can these competencies be developed through a programme based on the distance mode?

There is a strong opinion that distance education can be suitably employed for the cause of professional education. Let us now concentrate on discussing how this may be done. While stating generalities that may be applicable to training of professionals in any area, the paper specifically draws examples from the experience of launching the Diploma Programme in Early Childhood Care and Education at IGNOU.

### **Some Issues in the Design, Development and Delivery of Programmes of Professional Education**

A major area of focus in terms of design, development and delivery of programmes for professionals through the distance mode is that of imparting them skills. Rigorous attention to the minutest detail of providing skill training in programmes for professional development through distance education is necessary, if we are to challenge the still widely held notion that face to face mode is the only reliable way of imparting competencies, particularly skills, to the learners. Some questions often asked in this context with reference to imparting training in the area of ECCE are :

"Can you impart to a learner the skills of handling a group of four year old through the distance mode?"

"Can the continuous dynamism inherent in any teaching-learning situation be communicated to and experienced by students of a distance education programme?"

"Can a student reliably identify common childhood illnesses after having read about their symptoms in the Units?"

The training of professionals has to be viewed in two contexts:

- training professionals who are in-service but who need orientation or re-orientation
- training of learners who aspire to be professionals in the particular area.

While the needs of the learners in each of the two contexts overlap, there is considerable difference as well in the attitudes and skills they bring to the learning situation. Thus the *training programme needs to be flexible* to be able to address the needs of both the groups. This may necessitate one to design the skill training component differently in each case.

Developing skills in the learners requires the institution to:

- make arrangements for imparting skills
- assess the skills acquired through the training.

Provision of skill training is one of the areas where *networking* among various distance education (DE) institutions, distance education institutions and institutions providing education through the conventional face to face mode, and DE institutions and the NGO sector/private endeavours has a crucial role to play. Skill training can be imparted by including a component of practical work, field work, project work or placement. Each of these may mean, in fact does mean; different things in context of the various programmes launched by the IGNOU.

### **Using a Project-based and Practical-based Model for Providing Skill Training**

To the learners of the Diploma Programme in Early Childhood Care and Education, skill training is imparted through practical work and project work. Both are an integral part of course work and their successful completion is essential. The practicals form about one-fourth of the credit weightage in a particular Course (the remaining 6 credits are for theory work). Each of the three courses of the Diploma Programme has a practical component. The project work is entirely experimental in nature and is a course in itself, worth 8 credits. Thus, in the total Diploma Programme weightage of 32 credits, 14 credits are focused on providing actual work experience through practical and project work with the aim of developing skills.

Designing the practical and project work needs a sensitive and careful consideration of :

- the heterogeneity of the learner profile : Some of the factors that may have an influence are; prior experience in the area, pace of one's learning, motivation, assessibility to the training venue, family responsibilities.

- the operational feasibility for the institution in arranging for skill training. This would influence sustainability of the training and its replicability.
- the support to be provided to the learner in course of carrying out the practical work and the project work.
- workload for the learner.

One of the ways of equipping learners with skills is to place them for some period of time in a setting which is similar to the one they are finally expected to work in. The project work, referred to above, essentially takes this approach and is the mainstay of imparting skills to the learners of the Diploma Programme in Early Childhood Care and Education. It involves the placement of students in preschools/nursery schools (identified by the IGNOU) where they are expected to carry out some specific activities under the guidance and supervision of experienced preschool educators/nursery teachers. The duration of placement is for a maximum of 90 and a minimum of 30 working days. The preschools for placement are rigorously identified on the basis of detailed criteria of which the crucial ones are:

- number of children handled by a nursery teacher to be not more than 35 (ideally 20-25)
- play way approach to be followed for imparting preschool education as contrasted with the formal teaching and imparting of the 3 R's.
- outdoor play activities to be organised at least two-three times a week.

During the initial period of placement, which is primarily that of observation of the activities in the preschool, the preschool educator under whom the learner works serves as a role model, whose strengths the learner tries to emulate during the later part of the placement, when the learner herself carries out activities with children.

Herein comes the need for networking. Identification of 'ideal' preschool throughout the country is a mammoth task which requires the IGNOU to collaborate through its regional centres with Home Science colleges; universities; NGOs working in the area of child development, particularly preschool education; the branches of the Indian Association for Preschool Education and individuals — each of these resources have been tapped to help in identifying preschools for the placement of learners of the Diploma programme.

The main purpose of the practical work in context of the Diploma programme (which forms one-fourth of the work load in each of the three courses) is to give an opportunity to the learner to apply the theoretical concepts imbibed through the 'Blocks' to real life situations. A major goal of the practical work is to enable the learner to scientifically and objectively understand children's development by observing them and interacting with them in their natural settings.

The practical work involves:

- observations of children, including the disabled, in different settings
- conducting specific play activities with children

- interviewing parents with respect to health and nutrition practices
- visits to institutions and organisations working for children
- evaluation of diets and meals
- using communication strategies and methods for imparting health, nutrition and preschool education messages to the community.

The practical work in all the three courses is home-based. The learners themselves identify a child/group of children/parents/community members and carry out activities as stated in the practical manuals. Thus, the setting of practical work is informal as contrasted with the formal institutionalised setting of the project work. In this sense, the practical work serves as a preparation and familiarization period for the learners, which equips them for the more rigorous project work ahead.

### **Evaluation of Learners' Skills**

For skill training to be successful, evaluation procedures need to be well thought out. They must be objective and such that they evaluate the learner's performance in the various areas of skill development. The evaluation procedures for both the project work and the practical work of the Diploma Programme are different — they are more rigorous for the former.

*Evaluation of the project work is at two levels:*

- on the spot assessment of the learners' activities by the nursery teacher supervising and guiding their activities during their placement in the nursery school (70% weightage)
- assessment of the project file (which is a report of the learner's project work) by faculty at the IGNOU/experts identified by the faculty (30% weightage).

The purpose of evaluation is not mere grading — it is a major instrument of teaching as well.

In keeping with the less structured nature of the practical work, it is, by and large, the learners who evaluate themselves as they carry out the various activities described in the practical manuals. However, there is an objective assessment of the learner's work by the academic counsellor. The learner, after conducting the practical activities, writes a report on the basis of the guidelines provided in the practical manual and is evaluated and graded on this report by the academic counsellor. The home based nature of the practical work lowers institutional costs and also serves to develop in the learner a sense of self-accountability.

Over the four year period since the launch of the Diploma Programme, it has been observed that the project work is quite successful once the students are placed in an appropriate nursery school. A review of the learners' project files over the years by the faculty at the IGNOU shows that the learners are motivated to learn and their supervisors have been conscientious. But the bottleneck lies in the identification of appropriate

nursery schools/preschools for placement. Despite networking, there is still not an adequate number of quality preschools for placement of learners.

### **Support to Learners during Skill Training**

Providing support to the learners in pursuing the programme of study — a focal area in any programme offered through the distance mode — becomes even more significant in a programme of professional education. This is because the practical work/project work generates considerable anxiety in the learners and creates in them a need to reach out to other peers/teachers. This has been the experience in the Diploma Programme, despite the fact that detailed guidance is provided to the learners through the practical and project manuals. In many instances, specific examples have been provided in the manuals in an attempt to simulate possible learner's experiences. The manuals also incorporate flexibility to cater to various levels of learners. These efforts notwithstanding, the learners do seem to need face-to-face contact and lack of this at the crucial juncture has been found to be a major factor in student dropout and waning of interest in the Programme. It also has a negative impact on long term enrolment because of the negative work of mouth publicity.

Face-to-face support for the learners of the Diploma Programme is provided through the

- academic counsellor
- students' guide in the nursery school.

### **Prospects for Networking**

Networking is important not merely from the operational point of view of arranging for skill training but *also as a means of providing learner support*. The experience of the Diploma programme shows that while the learners are, by and large, satisfied with their interaction with the nursery guide, there are some gaps in the counsellor-learner interaction. One of the alternatives, in this case, to the traditional 'study centre — counsellor' model of providing student support — could be to identify Home Science colleges as *work centres* for the Diploma Programme. This would serve two purposes — the preschools in the colleges could serve as a placement centre for learners and the faculty in the colleges could provide counselling services.

The telecommunications and satellite network can be used to initiate virtual teaching-learning and thus reduce the learner's sense of isolation and anxiety. One specific strategy, untried as yet, could be to expose the students to the activities being carried out in a good preschool centre in one part of the country. In fact, this need not be limited to one's country along. Exposure to practices in other countries will help the learners to imbibe a cross cultural perspective and given them a favour of the diversity and dynamism in the field.

### **Building a Forum for Action through Networking**

Such a networking and sharing will have a much wider impact than merely providing training to students. The network of committed preschool centres, distance education institutions, learners and teachers of ECCE could well become a potential and persuasive advocacy group which could work towards securing the rightful place of ECCE in the Government's national plans. It could also be instrumental in changing general public opinion regarding the perception and practice of ECCE.

There is great potential, unexploited as yet, in using the telecommunication technology to network during the conceptualization of a programme. In this day of the global village, the rapid movement of the professionals from one cultural context to another, requires them to be aware of diversities and to be able to adapt themselves with a fair amount of ease. A programme of study that incorporates a cross cultural perspective is more likely to be successful than one which is relatively cocooned in its approach. The stage of programme design could be one where the faculty responsible for programme development could debate and discuss with experts in the field, with whom it has not been possible to have face to face contact, by using the telecommunication network.

There is considerable scope and advantage in sharing programmes that have already been developed. Often, we duplicate programmes, simply because we are not aware that something of this nature already exists. Of course, when borrowing a programme of study developed by another institution particularly in another country, we need to scrutinize carefully the relevance of the course material and adapt it to one's own cultural context.

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