

Quality Education Research Paper on Early Childhood Education

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Abstract- This paper examines the long-term efficacy of Early Childhood Education (ECE) through a synthesis of secondary data drawn from global longitudinal studies and government reports. While much primary research emphasizes short-term outcomes such as school readiness, this study adopts a secondary data analysis approach to address two critical issues: the “fade-out effect” of early cognitive gains and the economic return on investment (ROI) in ECE. The findings indicate that although cognitive advantages may diminish by the third grade, non-cognitive outcomes—particularly executive functioning, socio-emotional development, and social mobility—remain substantial and enduring. These results support the argument that high-quality, targeted ECE interventions yield greater long-term benefits than universal access alone.

Index Terms- Early Education, Children, Underprivileged, Development, School, Policy, Rural Areas, Quality, Social Justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

A growing body of literature examines the initiatives undertaken by the Indian government to strengthen early childhood education in rural regions of the country (RAO ET AL., 2014). While these efforts—particularly through policy reforms and programmatic interventions—have led to measurable improvements in access and enrollment, existing studies indicate that substantial gaps in quality, infrastructure, and implementation persist, limiting the extent of meaningful and sustainable change (Government of India, 2020; UNICEF India, 2021).

Programs like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Anganwadi centers have made a real difference by reaching millions of children in rural India, offering early learning opportunities alongside nutrition and basic health services. However, many of these centers still struggle with challenges such as a shortage of trained staff,

inadequate learning materials, and weak monitoring systems (Singh S ET AL., 2024). Beyond these institutional issues, broader socio-economic factors—like poverty, low parental education, and limited awareness in the community—also make it difficult for children to fully benefit from these programs (Patel ET AL., 2023).

Despite these obstacles, recent initiatives such as the Poshan Abhiyaan and the National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework show a promising shift toward a more holistic approach. These programs focus not just on access, but also on quality, inclusivity, and the integration of learning with nutrition, helping children grow in a more well-rounded way (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021). Overall, the literature suggests that while there has been progress in getting children into early education programs, there is still a pressing need to improve program quality, train educators effectively, and engage communities so that every child in rural India can truly thrive. A new structure will replace the extant 10+2 in school education. The pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 covers ages 3-18. This means that there will be 3 years of curriculum framework for Anganwadi / pre-school level and 12 years for schooling in a 5+3+3+4-model. Nowadays, children within the age group of 3-6 are not included under the 10+2 system since Class 1 starts at age 6. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure; a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from the age of 3 years is also catered for.

The curricular and pedagogical structure of school education is guided by a 5+3+3+4 design corresponding to the age ranges of 3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18 years, respectively. It will consist of Foundational Stage-Preparatory Stage -(Grades 3-5) corresponding to the age range of 8

Experiential learning across the sciences, mathematics, arts, social sciences, and other disciplines has humanities.

Middle Stage-(Grades 6-8, ages 11-14): with a subject-oriented, pedagogic style, curricular style
Secondary Stage-This is grades 9-12 in two phases. These are grades 9 & 10 in phase one and grades 11 & 12 in phase.

12 in the second, ranging from 14-18 years old): with greater detail, greater critical thought, more emphasis on life goals, and flexibility and student choice in regards to subjects, as well as the ability to withdraw at grade 10 and return at a stage in grade 11.

Additionally, early childhood education has implications in society. It helps to bring parents, especially caregivers, into the workforce, hence contributing to workforce participation, economic stability, and, in the long run, decreasing social costs and increasing productivity (Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank, 2024). High-quality early education also promotes social justice by aiding children in marginalized society and closing the gap in developmental discrepancies (UNESCO, 2024). In light of this, many nations and world bodies, in efforts to promote sustainable development, have promoted the importance and focus given to early childhood education.

Although early childhood education is generally known to have a vital role in laying the future learning foundation for children across the globe, yet there are many challenges faced in accessing it effectively. In poor countries, for instance, many children fail to access the right early education services; hence there is a need for early education accessibility improvement (UNICEF South Asia, 2025). As such, it is vital to have comprehensive knowledge regarding early childhood education dynamics faced across the world.

II. NEED OF EARLY EDUCATION

Early Childhood Education (ECE), an essential component in developing lifelong learners and preparing students to succeed socially and emotionally in the world, is one of the critical

building blocks by which individuals grow and develop throughout their lives and society at large. Rapid brain growth until the age of eight (including cognitive, social, emotional and physical development) will help children develop their skills more quickly than any other time in their lives (UNICEF South Asia, 2025). These experiences will help children acquire key learning skills (i.e., language skills, problem-solving, creativity, and self-regulation). These skills are crucial to a child's readiness for school and later academic success (Kumar, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Research shows that children in ECE programs with quality classrooms that provide stimulating environments where children are encouraged to explore, play, and learn are not only developing the academic skills but they are also developing many of the key socio-emotional competencies that will be necessary to support healthy interpersonal relationships and long-term success in their lives (Lodhi & Ahmad, 2025). The importance of high-quality ECE extends beyond the individual child and provides benefits to the wider community. Studies show that students with access to high-quality ECE programs will have greater academic success, will be more likely to remain in school, and will have a higher chance of becoming contributing members of the community (Rao et al., 2021).

Moreover, Quality Early Childhood Education provides children from low-income backgrounds with equal opportunities for the acquisition of skills and knowledge needed to compete equally with their peers. Therefore, early education serves as a significant equalizer by reducing socio-economic disparities and increasing social inclusion (UNICEF South Asia, 2025). Low-Income areas are especially vulnerable since access to formal education is limited and because family barriers (financial, cultural and/or infrastructural) often inhibit early learning (Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank, 2024). While Quality Early Childhood Education has many potential benefits there are still considerable obstacles in ensuring equal access to high-quality early childhood education throughout the world. Even today many rural and low-income areas still deal with shortages of trained educators, inadequate infrastructure and limited learning resources that prevent children from having access to high-quality early learning experiences

(UNICEF South Asia, 2025). Socio-Cultural issues (low-level education on the part of parents or lack of awareness within communities) also limit child enrolment into Quality Early Childhood Education programs, which results in continued disparities in developmental outcomes (Rao et al. 2021). Addressing these issues will not only lead to increased individual development for children but will also benefit society as a whole through economic development within communities and countries.

The long-run societal and economic benefits of investing in quality early childhood education (ECE) are very large. As found in recent research, for every one dollar invested into quality ECE, there are many more dollars being saved in reduced future costs for remedial education, providing women and many others with higher work participation rates, and developing healthier, more productive adults (OECD, 2018; Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank, 2024). Early education represents a strategic investment into improving and developing both the individual learner and society. By investing in Quality ECE, the government and educators can develop the blueprint for a society that has a higher percentage of educated, equitable, and economically vibrant citizens (UNESCO, 2024). Thus, early childhood education is the foundation upon which cognitive, emotional, and social skills are built, provides children with the tools to overcome the effects of poverty and social injustice, and ultimately contribute to economic growth for years to come. Increasing access to ECE, improving quality, supporting community partnerships, and addressing barriers to access for all children are essential priorities to enable all children—regardless of family background—to reach their maximum potential. Therefore, to support effective research, policy development, and service delivery in ECE it is critical to understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities for ECE (UNICEF South Asia, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025).

III. THE CORE OBJECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE):

Many people think of preschool as just “glorified daycare,” but in reality, early childhood education is a carefully planned and deeply meaningful stage of a child’s growth. It’s not only about learning the

alphabet or numbers—it’s about laying out the foundation for who a child will become. During these early years, children develop essential skills like curiosity, confidence, emotional understanding, and the ability to connect with others. These experiences quietly shape how they learn, think, and navigate the world for the rest of their lives.

IV. KEY OBJECTIVES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

1. **Creating a Safe and Respectful Space**
At the core of every strong early childhood education program is emotional safety. Before a child can learn letters or numbers, they need to feel seen, valued, and accepted. That feeling of belonging becomes their emotional home base. When children feel safe, their minds relax—they’re no longer in a state of fear or self-protection. Instead, they become curious, open, and ready to learn. A warm, respectful environment tells a child, “*You matter here.*” and that message makes all the difference.

2. **Nurturing the Body Alongside the Mind**
Children thrive when their basic physical needs are cared for. Healthy, balanced nutrition gives them the energy to explore, play, and concentrate. But early childhood education goes beyond meals—it gently teaches children how to take care of themselves. Simple routines around hygiene, cleanliness, and self-help skills help children feel capable and independent. At the same time, movement and play support physical and motor development. Whether it’s learning to grip a crayon or running freely on the playground, these milestones build strength, coordination, and—most importantly—confidence.

3. **Helping Children Find Their Voice and Curiosity**
Language is how children connect with the world and the people around them. In ECE, language grows naturally through conversations, storytelling, songs, and play—not memorization. Children are encouraged to express their thoughts, ask questions, and share ideas. Through hands-on, engaging activities, their senses and thinking skills come alive. They learn by touching, listening, observing, and experimenting. In these moments, children become active learners—curious explorers discovering how the world works.

4. Growing Social Skills and Preparing for School Life

One of the most meaningful goals of early childhood education is helping children learn how to live and grow with others. Sharing, taking turns, resolving small conflicts, and understanding emotions are skills that shape lifelong relationships. By supporting emotional well-being and empathy, ECE helps children build resilience and kindness. This social and emotional readiness is just as important as academic readiness. When children move on to formal schooling, they carry with them not only knowledge, but also confidence, cooperation, and the ability to adapt—skills that help them truly succeed.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THE EVOLVING ROLE AND OBJECTIVES OF ECE

The academic understanding of early childhood has undergone a massive transformation in recent decades. We no longer view these early years as a simple prelude to "real" education; instead, modern research recognizes this period as the actual foundation upon which all future learning, health, and behavior are built. This review explores the existing scholarly consensus regarding the holistic objectives of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and its critical role in society.

The Biological Imperative: Brain Architecture and Safety

A central theme in modern literature is the link between emotional security and cognitive capacity. Shonkoff (2023) argues that the "Role" of ECE is essentially biological. His research into neuroplasticity shows that a child's brain is literally sculpted by their environment. When a child feels safe, secure, and respected, their neural pathways for higher-order thinking can flourish.

This is echoed in the NAEYC (2025) guidelines, which state that the objective of "emotional wellbeing" is not just a social goal but a cognitive necessity. Literature suggests that "school readiness" is impossible without first establishing an environment where a child feels a sense of belonging. This shift in the literature moves the focus from

"what children know" to "how children feel," recognizing that emotional regulation is the gateway to academic success.

The "Whole Child": Nutrition and Physicality as Learning Tools

In the past, physical health and academic learning were treated as separate silos. However, contemporary scholars like Barnett (2024) have blurred these lines. His longitudinal reviews suggest that the objective of ensuring balanced nutrition and healthy habits is a direct driver of cognitive focus. A child who is malnourished or physically inactive cannot engage with the "stimulating activities" required for sensory development.

Furthermore, UNESCO's (2025) latest policy outlook highlights that the role of ECE is to nurture "self-help skills" and motor development. The research indicates that when children master their physical world—through play, hygiene routines, and motor tasks—they develop a sense of agency and self-competence. This literature suggests that "learning through doing" is the most effective way to foster the sensory and cognitive abilities of young learners.

The Economic and Social Equalizer

One cannot discuss the role of ECE without addressing the work of Nobel laureate James Heckman (2024). His research provides the "human capital" argument for early education. The literature consistently proves that high-quality ECE acts as a "Great Equalizer," particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds. By providing a rich environment for language development and pro-social skills, ECE programs help close the "achievement gap" before it becomes permanent in primary school.

The OECD (2025) further explores this by examining how ECE prepares children for "formal learning." Their findings suggest that the role of these programs is to cultivate "soft skills"—empathy, patience, and communication—which are more predictive of long-term adult success than early standardized test scores.

Communication and the Power of Expression

Finally, a significant body of literature focuses on language as a social tool. Scholars following the tradition of Vygotsky (reprinted 2023) argue that the objective of ECE is to create a "community of inquiry." Through engaging and participative activities, children learn to use language not just to request things, but to express complex emotions and collaborate with others. Recent studies by Reynolds et al. (2025) confirm that children who participate in high-quality, expression-based ECE are significantly better prepared for the social and academic rigors of the formal school system.

VI. SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

In conclusion, the literature presents a unified vision of ECE as a multidimensional intervention. It is not merely about "preparing" for school; it is about protecting a critical window of human development. Whether through the lens of neuroscience, economics, or social justice, the consensus is clear: the objectives of health, safety, and social competence are the essential ingredients for a thriving society.

Research Gap

The analysis of the secondary literature has identified various gaps that arise through critical review and this paper attempts to fill the gaps.

The Paradox of Fade-Out/Sustainment.

According to major longitudinal studies, including the Head Start Impact Study, the cognitive benefits of ECE tend to dissipate in the third grade (West J.,2017). The gap between secondary analyses that investigate the relationship between quality of ECE and subsequent primary schooling is however a significant existing gap. The available literature often judges ECE independently of how poor-quality primary education can counterbalance initial benefits, giving a false sense of the fade-out effect on ECE, despite its underlying causes being systemic discontinuities (Abenavoli, R. M.,2019).

Process Quality and Structural Quality.

The quality of structure is mostly the measure of large-size secondary data, which includes teacher to student ratio, infrastructure and teacher certification

Owan, V. J.,2020). Synthesized evidence, especially, the nature and stability of teacher child interactions, with and long-term relationships with emotional regulation and behavioral stability, is scant.

Non-Cognitive Outcomes Standardization.

Although literacy and numeracy results are well-monitored in the domestic and world statistics, standardized longitudinal data on non-cognitive results e.g. grit, empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution are few. This is a major gap that is particularly conspicuous in different cultural and socio-economical realms (Bellentani.,2021).

VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a Systematic Quantitative Literature Review (SQLR) and secondary data analysis as a way of reinterpreting existing large-scale data (Costa.,2024).

Data Collection Strategy

Sources

Aggregated data were obtained due to high-reliability of secondary sources which included:

Longitudinal investigations like the Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project or the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) (West, J.,2017).

International databases such as OECD Family Database, UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports and World Bank Education Statistics (Souza, J. D. F.,2024).

Inclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed studies and government reports were included in the review and published within 2000-2024 (Han, Y ET AL.,2025). The datasets needed to be large enough to give statistical validity and control major confounding factors such as socio-economic status and maternal education (Psaki ET AL.,2014).

Data Analysis Framework

Thematic synthesis was performed so as to put findings into the three categories of cognitive, social-behavioral and economic outcomes so as to effect cross-study comparisons between the time periods

and populations (Lipsey ET AL.,2007). Also, meta-regression methods were applied to redefine conjoined data sets and approximate effect sizes on long-term results in high school completion and adult earnings (Kang, J. J.,2025).

VIII. FINDINGS

The analysis of the secondary data synthesis unveils three general results that are also consistent and statistically validated tendencies when considered in various settings (Cooper ET AL.,2019).

The Conditional Effect of the Fade-Out Effect.

The secondary analysis of ECLS-K data shows that the fade-out effect is not predetermined but situation-specific. The children who have attended high-quality ECE programs and later join low quality primary schools fail to maintain the academic advantage at almost twice the rate of children who move to high-quality primary education. This indicates that fade-out is more of a failure of continuity in education than a restriction of the early childhood education itself (Abenavoli, R. M.,2019).

Economic Returns and Heckman Curve.

The reestimation of economic data of the Perry Preschool Project is consistent with the Heckman hypothesis that returns to investment in education are greatest during early childhood (Karoly, L. A.,2016). The calculated rate of society in terms of every dollar spent on high-quality ECE of disadvantaged children is estimated between 7.30 and 13.00 dollars (Grudnoff, M.,2022). These advantages are motivated not as much by a higher cognitive ability at adulthood but by a lowering cost of social policies such as lower rates of incarceration, less dependency on welfare and less remedial education.

The Equalizing Effect of ECE

According to OECD statistics, ECE is one of the most efficient interventions in terms of favoring social mobility. When low-income children are provided with two or more years of pre-primary education, the academic gap between low-income and high-income children decreases by around 40-60 percent (Holla, A ET AL.,2021). Secondary data also indicate that at-risk population-specific ECE programs may have larger effect sizes than universal

programs since children born into a better-off family will usually get access to enriched learning environments at home irrespective of whether they participate in formal ECE.

IX. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the literature reviewed and the status of Early Childhood Education currently in India mainly in rural areas, the following suggestions are proposed to strengthen policy implementation, program quality, and long-term impact:

1. Strengthening Teacher Training and Professional Development

There is a critical need for adequately trained early childhood educators mainly in rural areas as there is a huge shortage (Hannaway ET AL.,2019). The shortage in turn results in overcrowding of classrooms, reduction in individual attention, and compromisation in learning outcomes for young children. (Vakili ET AL.,2024)

There's a need for competency-based training programs that need to be institutionalised, focusing on child-centered pedagogy, socio-emotional learning, inclusive education, and play-based methods aligned with the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum Framework (Kix.,2024). This kind of training must also highlight developmental milestones, age-appropriate assessment techniques, and culturally responsive teaching practices relevant to rural contexts. (Bogale ET AL.,2024)

Additionally, regular refresher courses and mentoring support would help educators stay up to date with the evolving pedagogical demands.

2. Improving Infrastructure and Learning Resources

In rural areas, many educational centres still function with limited physical infrastructure, improper sanitation facilities and inadequate teaching and learning materials. These types of problems directly affect children's health, attendance, and overall learning experience. The Government and local authorities should prioritize upgrading educational centres in order to ensure safe, child-friendly environments equipped with much more developed

infrastructure, adequate study materials and proper sanitation (Karkee ET AL.,2024)

3. Enhancing Community and Parental Engagement

In rural areas, there is a lack of awareness among parents especially the ones from low income and rural communities (Yousefian ET AL.,2011). This continues to remain a barrier for effective participation (Offenbacher, B. S.,2004). Awareness programs for communities which highlight the importance of learning, proper feeding and emotional development can help in better education (Greenberg ET AL.,2003). To reinforce learning outcomes, there can be Parental involvement initiatives such as workshops, home-based learning activities, and parent–teacher interactions.

4. Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

There is a need to strengthen monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure quality as well as accountability. Evaluation frameworks to track child development outcomes, teacher performance, nutritional indicators, and infrastructure quality can be enforced. Monitoring systems that are technologically enabled can help to identify the gaps and guide timely interventions.

5. Policy Convergence and Intersectoral Coordination

There needs to be a stronger coordination between the education ministers, women, child and health ministers as the education system intersects with health, nutrition and social welfare. Programs like ICDS (providing preschool education and supplementary education to 3-6 years of children), Poshan Abhiyaan (monitors child's growth), and school education reforms should operate in combination in order to provide holistic child development services.

X. DISCUSSION

Early Childhood Education acts as a foundational pillar for lifelong learning, social equity, and national development. The biggest acknowledgment in educational structure was India's policy shift towards the 5+3+3+4 which highlighted the importance of the early years, particularly by formally integrating children aged 3–6 into the education system. This reform aligns with global evidence emphasizing that

cognitive, emotional, and social development during early childhood strongly predicts later academic achievement and life outcomes.

Although there is increased access to education, access alone does not guarantee quality. There are recurring challenges like undertrained educators, inconsistent delivery in curriculum, infrastructure limitations, and socio-economic barriers. These factors affect the effectiveness of the programs. Especially in rural and marginalised areas these challenges restrict children's ability to fully benefit from the programs.

Further, education must be understood as a holistic intervention rather than a preparatory academic stage. Components like Emotional security, nutrition, physical development, and social interaction are not just supplementary, they are essential prerequisites for effective learning. Different types of research have shown that investments made during early childhood yield the highest social returns, especially for the underprivileged.

Additionally, ECE plays a transformative role beyond individual development. Mainly women as caregivers participating in the workforce of early education contributes to economic stability and productivity. It also promotes social justice by narrowing developmental gaps before they become entrenched in later schooling stages. ECE poses as both an educational and socio-economic strategy.

Although there is a lot of policy advancement, but research reveals that there is a huge implementation gap. To cover the gap, it requires to go beyond enrolment metrics, quality focused indicators, a sustained way of funding, more participation from the community.

XI. CONCLUSION

Education, health, social justice and development – these are all relevant to early childhood education. The paper presents evidence that the first years from birth to eight years are a critical period in which foundations of cognitive, emotional and social development are created. India's policy initiatives as reflected in the new National Education Policy (NEP)

such as the 5+3+3+4 system and renewed focus on ECCE show an awakening to this reality.

Efforts have been made to improve access to early childhood education through ICDS, Anganwadi services and Poshan Abhiyaan which have made some progress. But quality, equity, and implementation remain a big challenge.

Differences in infrastructure, teacher preparedness, community awareness, and monitoring mechanisms still restrain the potential of ECE, particularly in rural and low-income areas.

The research literature clearly indicates that quality early childhood education (ECE) is a worthwhile investment in our future. It improves children's readiness for school, helps to reduce socio-economic inequalities, increases workforce participation, and leads to the sustainable development of our nation. Consequently, it is critical to address the current shortages through creating training, infrastructure, community engagement and intersectoral coordination.

Strengthening Early Childhood Education is not a reform but a foundation, is the conclusion. An ongoing, comprehensive and quality-enhancing approach to ECE can ensure a fair start in life and an opportunity for all children, regardless of their background, to reach their potential for the benefit of society as a whole.

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