Chapter 1

Conceptualizing and Setting the Stage

Although extensive research has been conducted on early childhood education in India, most of it has been focused on initiatives and projects sponsored by the Indian government centered on rural areas or urban slums for children from low socioeconomic and rural communities. Or else it has been sponsored by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations such as the UNICEF and UNESCO as well as the World Bank, but which have also focused mostly on educational development at the grass roots level. The main thrust of these programs has been on researching and developing projects to ensure that children living in rural and economically disadvantaged communities get basic safety, hygiene, and nutrition. Consequently, there has been almost no in-depth formal research conducted on early childhood education in the private urban schools with which the middle-class Indian family is associated. The rapidly growing Indian middle-class population of almost 350 million (more than the total U.S. population) includes lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class families belonging to social and occupational groups such as those employed in the government service; doctors, engineers, lawyers and other such professionals; well-to-do merchant families in the business and trading occupations; school teachers in large urban centers and in institutes of higher education; those in journalism and media; those who are partially or fully educated among the middle-level peasantry; the white-collar workers in the private sectors; policy makers and legislators; and a considerable population of university students. It is estimated that by the year 2025 this middle-class population will total 550 million people (Varma, 1999). My objective is to bring the Indian cultural and postcolonial perspective of early childhood

teacher preparation and practice to the discourse of global early childhood education. This perspective may help shed light on aspects of urban schooling in India, such as the nature of a socially constructed early childhood curriculum; early childhood pedagogy, teachers’ intrinsic beliefs, and the tensions between teacher preparation and practice; the challenge of working with large classes; the prevailing image of the teacher and child in Indian society; understanding the measures of school success for young children; and so forth. I would like to emphasize that the ensuing discussions are not, by any chance, reflective of all of the schools that exist in India—a hugely diverse country in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic classes, and the stratified caste system. This book is based on the study of a small slice of the much larger system of education in India, but it is an important slice that has not been researched enough.

I began my study with certain assumptions, starting with the notion that early childhood education in India was informally influenced by local intrinsic beliefs, values, and expectations, and formally influenced by the Euro-American discourse of education that dominates the field in general. Starting early in life, and through informal and indirect channels, Indian children begin to learn the values inherent in India’s cultural philosophy, which is based primarily on Hinduism. My second assumption was that teachers in urban India faced a cultural discrepancy between the educational philosophy upon which their professional training was based and the Indian philosophy upon which their actual classroom work was based. The values and beliefs that teachers learned through their social and cultural experiences influenced their practice to a large extent. My third assumption was that the lifestyles of people in urban India are based on their local and traditional belief systems, as well as on the more modern ways of life as seen in younger societies of the West. My fourth assumption was that my research would provide the space for the voice of the “other” to be heard, the “other” being the marginalized, non-Western early childhood teacher who strives to be the “right” teacher, who feels pressured and compelled to follow the standards of early childhood education that have been articulated within the early childhood discourse that is dominant in the “West”—the “West” meaning English-speaking, predominantly “white” nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

Urban India in the context of this book refers not only to the large metropolitan cities in India but also to smaller cities. Let me attempt to provide a snapshot image of the city of New Delhi, where I conducted my study. New Delhi is the capital of India and is the seat of the central government. Located in northern India, it is one of the four largest metropolises in the country with a population of about 13 million people spread over an area of approximately 1,500 square kilometers. The city is a busy, congested mix of