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# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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“Learning Curve is a publication on education from Azim Premji University.

It aims to reach out to teachers, teacher educators, school heads,  
education functionaries, parents and NGOs, on contextual and thematic  
issues that have an enduring relevance and value to help practitioners.  
It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives,  
encourages new and informed positions, thought-provoking points of  
view and stories of innovation. The approach is a balance between  
being an ‘academic’ and ‘practitioner’ oriented magazine.”

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## FROM THE EDITOR



This Issue of the Learning Curve focuses on one of the most important periods in any individual's life – early childhood. Whatever differences there may be on any other aspect of education, this is one area on which everyone agrees: that the years

between birth and eight are the most significant and can make or break a life. So universal is this that it is equally true in all cultures.

This subject is of such importance and magnitude that all of us were unanimous in our decision to devote a whole Issue to the subject. Why educationists and psychologists consider this to be a prime time, when interventions should take place, how they should happen if they are to achieve optimum long-term results: these are all important and on-going concerns of anyone who has anything to do with children. In the first place are parents, who are the first organisers of an infant's life. Every thing is an opportunity for learning because everything is so wondrously new. Whether it is language acquisition, motor skills, skills for life, such as human interaction, learning how to learn: all of it occurs every moment in these vital first years.

In the early years, curriculum should ideally be holistic spanning creativity, including music and the arts, early mathematics along with language development. Equally important are identification of special needs and subsequent inclusion. This gives research primacy: to make sure of successful and meaningful ECE programmes, constant focus has to be placed on all aspects of working with children. This is possible only when there is continuous search and dialogue to ever newer discoveries in the field.

Government as well as private bodies are very aware of this and want to provide the very best kindergarten education that is possible. However, does that happen? In the case of private centers, there is no controlling body, which makes sure that basic standards are being kept up. In the case of government centers, teachers are so busy with administrative details that they are unable to do what is required. Space is an issue in both cases and lack of infrastructure is another impediment. In the

home - the first school that a child is in, albeit informally - the pressures of everyday life do not allow interactions that were commonplace 30 years ago. Add to this the inert influence of the computer, ipad, mobile phone and TV, none of which require active language skills and the stage is set for wasted opportunity, because all the time, precious time ticks away.

This Issue has focus articles by some of the most well-known and much respected educationists in the country, followed by very practical and hands-on approaches to Early Childhood Education (ECE). As a sample, here are some of the issues dealt with. There are articles describing a successful experiment to include age and ability levels, an outline of the importance of creativity and the arts in early childhood. Gender rights in early childhood and new light on teaching reading skills, something every child should have the opportunity to learn, have also found a place in the Issue. Two other very important aspects - the role of a teacher as a researcher and the way forward for ECE have been discussed.

Other contributors have shared invaluable practical experiences. For instance a very important aspect, which we may not always consider- readiness for the schooling - experience is the topic of a separate article, as is the examination of the ticklish issue of the mother tongue versus English in ECE. The way to learning being a unique process, and a case for early intervention have been made out. Another thought-provoking aspect is the executive summary of the Azim Premji Foundation's project in Medak, Andhra Pradesh.

This is by no means an exhaustive list – it is a sampling of the diversity of this issue. We think that it is a comprehensive examination of a topic of immense magnitude, affecting not only the individual child but also the country and the world. Put simply, the future of our planet depends on the way we handle our young children.

Before I close, our thanks for this Issue go to Jigisha Shastri and Kinnari Pandya. They very kindly agreed to be advisors to the Issue and without their help and close involvement at every stage – from helping us decide on relevant topics to suggesting names and contacting other experts- this would not have been possible. Thank you both.

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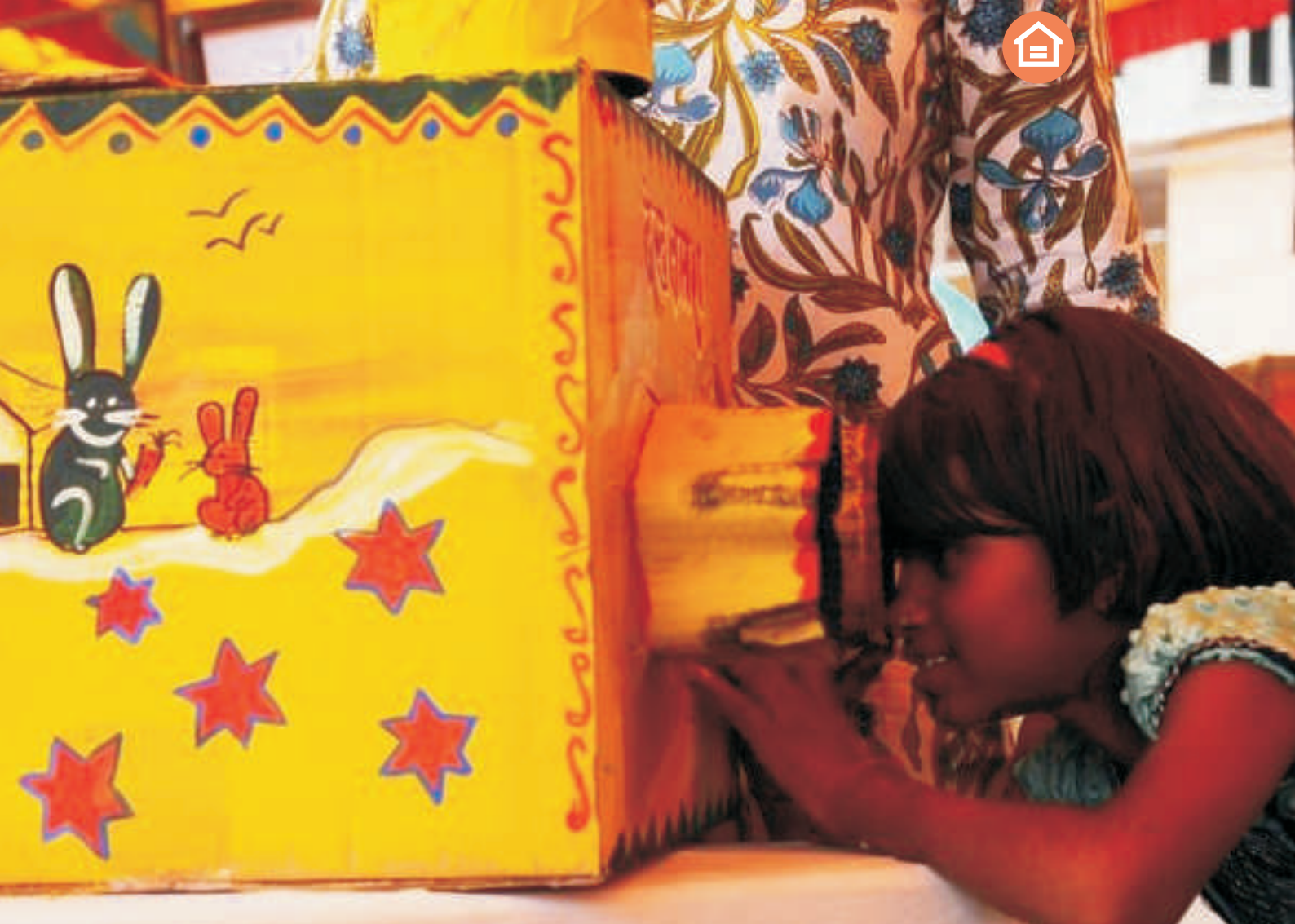
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# SECTION A

# THE BIG PICTURE



# The Importance of Early Childhood Education

**Indu Prasad**


The only unregulated area in education in India at this point is Early Childhood Education. There are a number of rules for school education, now even a law for universal school education, numerous legislations, policy structures and frameworks. However, there really isn't anything like this for early childhood education. We do have a government pre-school system through the Anganwadis in rural areas. But there is absolutely zero regulation in the private space. So I can decide to start a pre-school in my home today and no one will ask me any questions - what curriculum/board is to be followed, children of what age are to be admitted, is it legal to take in children when they are 18 months old or should they be taken in only at 3 years, minimum safety standards to be followed, training that one is to have undergone, etc. So it is an absolutely 'free-for-all' space. Therefore, there is a huge mushrooming of all kinds of private centres for early childhood care and education, especially in the urban space – day-care centres, crèches, pre-schools. There are no rules for setting up and running any of these. Therefore, there is a huge area of concern here, because it has an impact on safety of children, their learning, their growth and their development. The early childhood years are one of the most critical in a child's development.

While this is the scenario in urban areas, rural areas have the regulated space of government anganwadis. The overall idea, and in most states, the curricular guidelines and standards that have been set-up for nutrition, etc. are quite commendable. However, implementation is fairly poor for a variety of reasons. So we have both the urban - semi-urban - rural unregulated private space versus the regulated government space which is in a fairly sorry shape. Tamil Nadu apparently is doing very well in its ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) program, but 'very well' seems only relative to what may be happening in most other

parts of the country. Whether the private space, though unregulated is doing some good service, we have no idea. There has been very little research or studies done at a scale to be able to tell us what is actually happening. There is an entire range from the next-door neighbour running a pre-school in her extra room or garage or garden to the very high-end sophisticated pre-school systems which look very good but are unaffordable for most people. This is an enormous space, without common principles, and therefore there is nothing as a single entity called the 'private space'.

Another important dimension is that we have a large number of children coming into government schools in Class 1 with no previous understanding or experience of a structured learning environment. Many, many children are walking into Class 1 as their first experience of school, after spending the first five-and-a-half to six years of their lives at home, or some of it at a dysfunctional Anganwadi, or just managing somehow. So we have a lot of children for whom the first six years are fairly loose, with no real thinking of what is happening, given the fact that in most of those situations both parents are working, the family support system sometimes exists and sometimes doesn't, and there are nutritional as well as health and safety issues attached. This is not what is happening everywhere, but it is sort of the large picture of what is happening in the first six years of the child's life in this country.

The urban migrant space is another space where you have young children who are moving with their families from, say, one construction site to another. What happens to them? They mostly live in fairly unhygienic, unsafe environments. Builders are required to run a crèche, depending on the size of the project, etc. Many of them don't. This again is a very loosely regulated space. Given the levels of pollution, safety, equipment around, lack of supervision, lack of hygiene, lack of nutrition, it is




indeed an extremely difficult situation for these children. Added to it is that they are away from the comfort zone of their own homes, having migrated from their villages. They are cut off from their larger extended families and community in the villages and live in small nuclear families here, often in places where the language is very different from their own.

We are also in the middle of a change in the whole family structure, which affects semi-urban and urban families more. Less and less families have grandparents at home, aunts and uncles, and other children. Earlier, you would be one among about ten children; a grandmother telling you a story regularly, someone playing with you all the time, and access to the kitchen which is a wonderful place full of all kinds of things, access to the garden, access to animals – lot of things going on around that is a very conducive environment for children to learn. Since there would be a lot of adults – and all kinds of them – the child would experience a lot of language. The child would have all kinds of these opportunities, which were not necessarily structured, to learn and grow. Slowly, one or two child families came in and there was less and less of these kinds of interactions, which is making it more difficult for the child to understand the idea of sharing, the idea of learning to live with each other, learning language itself, picking up reasoning, etc. For example, you will notice that in houses with two or three children, the younger one often learns things faster. It is not that the younger is more intelligent or the older is less bright. It is just about the opportunity – when the younger one is at a stage when her brain is sharp and like a sponge, she has the opportunity of having an older child around her who is already learning a lot of things.

Research says that the first six years are extremely critical to a child's development – cognitive development, emotional development, general health, development of dispositions towards learning, disposition towards others, etc. These may sound like big things for babies, but are actually very important, because they set a lot of tones and expectations. The way children learn language in the first six years of their life, I feel they never learn it with that kind of ease ever again. If one looks at brain development, the kind of neural connections that are being formed in the first twelve years, and certainly in the first six, are never repeated. The

number of neural connections formed is really the amount you learn – this may not be a technical way of putting it, but a simplistic way of understanding it. It is the varied experiences that children get and repetition of experiences which helps a child learn much faster, and by this we do not mean learn before one's time or age. It just means being able to see things, develop concepts, understand dynamics of what is going on around, see connections, see relationships – all these begin very early. Language plays a big part in this, because language and cognition are very closely linked. Language is the way we construct the world for ourselves as well as for others. Learning language begins very early in life. Therefore, even when they are very young, talking a lot to children, explaining to them, discussing with them helps tremendously in the development of their language skills. Children may not have begun speaking, and language does not necessarily mean speaking. Language, first and foremost, is the way one thinks and children are constantly thinking. Speaking, reading, and writing, come later on.

What would make a difference would be a child (say, 2-3 years old) growing in a home which values the written word and therefore sits with her mother, father, grandmother, older sibling and everyday spends a couple of hours turning the pages of a book, listening to a story, understanding the connect between the story and the written word, understanding that there in the written word is a world of magic; this child by the time she is five or six, the kind of language she has developed will make her understanding and grasp of more advanced concepts that she has to learn in school much easier, because she has already gotten the base. Secondly, she has developed a love for learning because there have been positive experiences around learning and those positive experiences have become embedded in the architecture of the brain - good emotions, happy circumstances, something exciting to do all form a network of understanding in her mind. Now, let us consider another situation – a home where there is poverty of this kind of resource, and that kind of a home need not necessarily have to be a rich or a poor home, since this has nothing to do with money. While money does help you access resources, and children coming from difficult socio economic circumstances struggle a lot, there are homes which



have resources but the culture of learning, the love for reading, access to books, and the excitement around reading and writing is missing. So the child comes, at age six, into class 1, without that and therefore it takes a little time for that child to be able to make those kinds of connections, to be able to figure out various kinds of relationships, to understand a lot of concepts – so this child comes in a little handicapped in that sense.

The idea of pre-school is really to provide these opportunities - to encourage sensory exploration, cognitive exploration, emotional bonding, learning to play with each other, learning to think about another human being, about objects, to understand colour, the joy of reading. Many things like this are introduced at that time and connected with happy and good experiences. This forms a permanent bond. And if this can be done in an atmosphere of emotional safety, an atmosphere where a child is a child and she is accepted the way she is, encouraged, praised, loved, cared for, her needs understood, then the entire experience forms something positive in the child's mind which lives forever. The converse is also true. Children with very difficult experiences in early childhoods – experiences of deprivation, of violence of all kinds, experiences with adults that have taught them very early on to be scared of power, developed in them a fear of the adult, of authority, of the person in control – these are also messages that go home very quickly.

It is not just enough to say that children must have positive learning-stimulating experiences in childhood; it really depends on what exactly those experiences are. So, I would say that it is better to keep the child in a happy home rather than sending her to a lousy play school. Even with parents or grandparents who don't quite know what exactly to do with the child, it is much less damaging than sending the child to a pre-school where there is structure and there is learning, but there is either learning beyond their age or learning out of fear and force. The whole idea is to create experiences of joy at this age and generate excitement. Children are already asking questions, they are already curious, they are already excited by many things, even those looked at by adults as very ordinary, it's a whole new world for children, filled with excitement and interest – that is what one has to keep alive. The very idea of language, - where everything has a name, a

system where you can call something by some name and some other thing by another name – the idea of colour, the kinds of shades you have of colour; the world is actually an exciting place, especially to someone who is just entering it. So the idea is that we give our children this kind of experiences, which are cognitively stimulating and emotionally safe. If this is possible, it is what sets the stage for both a positive attitude towards learning as well as eases the child into her school.

Nutrition plays a very, very critical role. And in our country this is a huge thing, because most of our children enter class 1, aged six, nutritionally deficient in the most critical components (vitamin B-complex, minerals, etc.), many of them anaemic, especially our girls. All the vital nutrients have a huge role to play in cognitive ability. There is a strong correlation between nutritional deficiency and cognitive ability. So most of our children walk into class 1 already three steps behind, which is why in the Aanganwadi system, the nutritional aspect is a big piece – one which we definitely cannot ignore in our country. The reason for the mid-day meals was precisely that. One, it was to increase attendance, etc. but also simply because food, the functioning of the brain and learning have a direct correlation. If you look at the Scandinavian countries, Finland for example, they are some of the richest countries in the world, but they all have a lunch program in their schools. It is not because children cannot afford to get lunch or that they are from homes that are nutritionally problematic, but because they see it as very basic and an essential part of education. It has nothing to do with being rich or poor, but rather has to do with the fact that nutrition and learning have a very close connect with each other. Nutrition is connected not only to your body, but connected to the way your brain works. Anaemia, for instance, has an impact on memory – a very critical part of learning. So in pre-school, the issues are around brain development and therefore the kind of stimulating environment we give a child, the kind of relationships we help the child to build, the kind of physical nutrition we provide and physical movement we give space for. This is why we moved to the idea of an organised, structured pre-school environment. Otherwise, families where these are available are good enough. I feel, and many may disagree, that if one has a home that provides all this, there is actually nothing like it. It does not

necessarily have to be a formal school. The only thing is that sending a child to pre-school does get her used to the structured environment that she will meet at age six, once she gets into regular school. But it really doesn't take very long for basically well-adjusted children to adjust into a new environment, they learn it quite quickly.

In spite of the early childhood stage being so critical to a child's overall development, we somehow don't seem to have given it the importance it is due. While higher education is being given a lot of attention, the very start of one's life is sort of being left to chance. Pre-school education does not come under the Ministry of Education. It belongs to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD). At the Centre it is called Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, but in the State governments it is under WCD. The entire Anganwadi system comes under the purview of this. Even if there is an Anganwadi in the same compound as a primary school, the two don't interact with each other, at a system level. There is no link between what a child learns in the Anganwadi and what she will learn in class 1 at school. There is no conversation between the primary school and the Anganwadi. So systemically, there is zero connect between the Anganwadi system and the primary school system. ECE is not being seen as one, part of a continuum in a child's education and two, as critical to a child's overall education.

Early childhood is still being seen more only from a health and medical angle, i.e., the focus is more on safe birth, immunisation, etc. We have still not understood, as a system and as part of society in general, the connection between various stimuli in the early childhood years that make future life so much more empowering, for instance, even as parents, we do not understand how critical many of our actions are and what kind of impact it can have in the early years. This doesn't mean that one has to turn into a very unnatural and structured parent, but one needs to be aware that whatever is done has an impact on the child who lives in your home, who is absorbing so many things and to whom you (as a parent) are the most important person in the child's life. For the child, her whole world revolves around you, and therefore what you do becomes absolutely critical. So the child goes through all experiences along with you. So as parents, we don't quite take our own roles as seriously as we should.

Also, at a systemic level we have not given enough thought to what kind of experiences the child will go through in the five to six years before getting into school and the kind of impact it has. It also stems from our overall understanding - or the lack of it - of children, of learning, of growing, of what education is supposed to do. For instance, I have a child in my neighbour's house who is two-and-a-half and his mother expressed her concern that she has not yet put him to a pre-school when everyone around seems to have already put their children into one at the age of two itself and have begun learning to write. The child is very active, plays with a lot of children in the apartment complex in the evening and is with his grandmother the entire morning where she keeps him fully entertained. I don't see a missing piece yet. So the mother's concern about him joining a pre-school is more out of a pressure from seeing what everyone around is doing, not from what the child actually requires. The basic frame of operation itself seems to be worry and fear. It is fair to expect that the child should meet other children, interact with them, learn to share, etc. but to expect him to start writing at three is absolutely unnecessary. If one looks at the fine motor development of a child, it is actually the last piece that happens, at almost age five plus. So being able to easily tie shoelaces, put on all kinds of buttons and write are things that a child starts to do only at almost age six. And today, many pre-schools make children write at two-and-a-half, when the muscles are still completely unready. This is actually quite detrimental to development and can cause damage to a lot of kids, not only physically, but more





important, mentally. It straightaway sends an unpleasant experience message. Forgetting completely for a moment about the emotion or ethics behind it, and looking only at the neurology, the neural connection is being formed between the action of writing and the sadness felt by the child by doing that action. The message that remains with the child is, "Writing is a terrible activity; I will be slow at it; I will get yelled at for it; My hand hurts". We have already turned the activity into a punishment for the child. There are ways of doing it. If children naturally start writing early, let them do

it, but let them decide and write the way they want to. It need not be corrected or hand-writing fine-tuned at that stage. It can be corrected later, at age six, when the child has more control. Nothing is lost by doing it a little later. Flexibility in pace of learning doesn't mean that learning does not happen. If a child goes through positive, exciting, mentally challenging experiences, she will succeed, because she is capable of learning and is at her sharpest. It is us who destroy that. We create circumstances by which children stop asking questions by the time they are eight or ten years old!



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# Early Childhood Care and Education and the Right to Education

Dolashree Mysoor

This essay describes the law and policy developments on the issue of early childhood care and education (ECCE), particularly, pre-school education in India. It also attempts to explore how courts have deliberated on this important policy objective. The article begins with a brief description of the constitutional position on ECCE and proceeds to an understanding of the legal developments on this issue.

## The Constitution on ECCE:

The Constitution of India includes social welfare objectives such as education and work as directive principles of state policy. Unlike the fundamental rights<sup>1</sup>, no court can enforce a directive principle of state policy or adjudicate upon a matter that involves infringement of a directive principle<sup>2</sup>. However, the state is expected to pay heed to these directives as guidelines for formulating law and policy.

Originally, the Constitution of India, 1950 included universal elementary education as an unenforceable directive principle under Article 45 (erstwhile)<sup>3</sup>. This directive principle of state policy stated that the state must endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to all children until they complete the age of fourteen years. Further, it is important to note that Article 45 (erstwhile) was the only directive principle of state policy under the Indian Constitution to prescribe duration of 10 years by which, the state was to secure the stated objective. This provision did not distinguish between ECCE and elementary education; it only describes the obligation of the state to provide free and compulsory elementary education to all

children up to the age of fourteen years.

*The Supreme Court in Mohini Jain<sup>4</sup> and Unnikrishnan<sup>5</sup> :*

The Supreme Court declared and clarified on the right to education in two judgments- Mohini Jain v State of Karnataka (1992) and Unnikrishnan J. P. v State of Andhra Pradesh (1993). In the former case, the Supreme Court declared the right to education as part of the fundamental right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of Constitution. The Court held that the right to education is available to all citizens at all stages. Citizens could now demand that the state provide them education. In Unnikrishnan, the Court emphasized on the principle that the right to education is concomitant to the right to life. However, it restricted the right to free and compulsory education to children up to fourteen years. The Court reasoned that- (i) the constitutional directive is available only to children, and (ii) the state does not have the economic capacity to provide the right to education at all levels.

Both these judgments emphasize that the right to education is essential to meaningfully realize the right to life. However, neither of these judgments distinguishes between elementary education and ECCE. For the Court, this distinction between ECCE and elementary education does not pose any concerns because the right to education was made available to children until they complete the age of fourteen years.

## The fundamental right to education and ECCE:

In 2002, the Parliament of India inserted the right of children to free and compulsory education as a

<sup>1</sup>The Supreme Court and High Courts under Articles 32 and 226 of the Constitution can enforce fundamental rights such as the right to equality, freedom or life.

<sup>2</sup>Article 37, Constitution of India, 1950

<sup>3</sup>The forthcoming section of the article entitled "The fundamental right to education and ECCE" covers the revision that was made to Article 45 under the Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002.

<sup>4</sup>Mohini Jain v State of Karnataka, (1992) 3 SCC 666

<sup>5</sup>Unnikrishnan J. P. v State of Andhra Pradesh 1993 SCC (1) 645

fundamental right under Article 21 A in the Constitution<sup>6</sup>. The newly inserted right was restricted to elementary education for children between 6 and 14 years. As a result, the Supreme Court or High Courts can remedy any infringement

of Article 21 A. However, the amendment modified Article 45 to include ECCE for children below the age of six years. The revised Article 45 states that the State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for children up to the age of six years. Therefore, by including ECCE as a directive principle of state policy, the amendment restrains any person from approaching a court to enforce any scheme or programme concerning ECCE<sup>7</sup>.

The responsibility of providing elementary education lies with the Ministry of Human Resource Development while the Ministry of Women and Child Development is responsible for implementing the ICDS and hence ECCE. The insertion of the right to education was proposed by the MHRD. As a result, children under the age of six years have been left outside the scope of the right to education.

#### **The right to food case<sup>8</sup>:**

Some orders passed by the Supreme Court's in P.U.C.L. v Union of India (2001) are also relevant to our discussion as they were vital to universalizing the Anganwadi system in India. This petition was filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties to uphold the right to food as a part of the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. The petitioners moved the Court to secure access to food and nutrition and protect people from hunger and starvation. The Court has issued several orders for the implementation of all schemes related to food security including, the universalization of mid-day meals scheme and revival of the public distribution system. A court appointed committee monitors the implementation of these orders through implementation reports submitted by all states, union territories and the union government.

The ICDS is key to the conceptualization of ECCE in India as it provides for the health, education and

developmental needs of children under the age of six years. With regard to this scheme, the Court issued one order<sup>9</sup> directing the state to universalize the Anganwadi system under the ICDS. Another subsequent order<sup>10</sup> was passed requiring the state "To provide conditions necessary for pre-school children's psychological and social development through early stimulation and education." Unfortunately, we find that many Anganwadis are either under-staffed or functioning with dismal infrastructure even in 2013<sup>11</sup>.

#### **The RTE Act and ECCE:**

The right to education under Article 21 A is implementable in a manner determined by law, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (hereafter, "RTE"). While this law mostly applies to elementary education, it is optional for state governments to provide early childhood care and education (Section 11). Additionally, the RTE also mandates that where schools provide pre-school education, the entry class for admissions and reservations under the RTE shall be pre-school (Section 12). As a consequence, all schools that provide pre-school education are also under an obligation to provide free and compulsory pre-school education. This provision under the RTE entitles children (i) to obtain admission in a neighbouring government, private or aided school; and (ii) to be provided free and compulsory pre-school education if the child falls under an economically or socially disadvantaged section of society.

The constitutional validity of the RTE Act was challenged by a group of unaided and aided schools in Society for Unaided Private Schools of Rajasthan v Union of India<sup>12</sup>. In 2012, the Foundation intervened in this petition arguing that the validity of the RTE must be sustained. Further, on the issue of ECCE, the Foundation submitted that the Court must read ECCE into the right to education under Article 21A, thereby seeking an extension of this right to children under the age of 6 years. This submission was based on three grounds, namely-

<sup>6</sup>The Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002

<sup>7</sup>Article 37 of the Constitution prohibits any court from enforcing any directive principle of state policy.

<sup>8</sup>People's Union for Civil Liberties v Union of India W. P. (c) 196 of 2001

<sup>9</sup>W.P. (c) 196/2001, Order dated 28/11/2012, available at: <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/orders/nov28.html>

<sup>10</sup>W.P. (c) 196/2001, Order dated 29/04/2004, available at: <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/orders/apr2904.html>

<sup>11</sup>"Poor Status of Anganwadis in Bangalore" CIVIC (2012), available at:

<http://civicspace.in/sites/default/files/attachments/public%20hearing%20on%20health%20english%20version.pdf>. Also see "Anganwadis for All – A Primer" Right to Food Campaign (2007) available at: <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/icds06primer.pdf>

<sup>12</sup>(2012) 6 SCC 1

- (i) the Supreme Court in Unnikrishnan held that all children are entitled to the right to education up to fourteen years and this right is enforceable against the state;
- (ii) research shows that ECCE plays a vital role in securing educational outcomes in schools; and
- (iii) that the domain of pre-school education in India is largely unregulated as the RTE Act mandates norms and standards for Class I and above. The Court, however, was silent on the issue of extending the right as the Parliament had included revised Article 45 to cover ECCE.

### **ECCE and the out of school children litigation in Karnataka:**

The importance of ECCE has also been brought before the Karnataka High Court in the out of school children petition<sup>13</sup>. The Karnataka High Court took up a suomotu petition<sup>14</sup> on the issue of out of school children based on a newspaper report<sup>15</sup>. The Court considered the issue of 50,000 children out of school as a massive violation of the fundamental right to education. In this case, the Court is not only attempting to redress the situation of out of school children, but it has also entered domains of educational governance by constituting a High Level Committee that will oversee RTE implementation in Karnataka. This litigation has also resulted in many changes including new definitions of out of school children and changing the functions of attendance authorities. However, it is interesting to note that the focus on the Anganwadi system in this petition was limited to ensuring that children transition to mainstream schools without any attention paid to ECCE as a broader concern. Issues that did gain momentum were those related to infrastructure in Anganwadis, toilets particularly<sup>16</sup>. While the Court has emphasized on the need for better coordination between various departments, the objective of ensuring good quality ECCE has been left outside the scope of this litigation.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

While the Indian State has successfully legislated on the issue of elementary education of children

between the age of six and fourteen years, there have been few efforts focused on securing uniform and good quality ECCE. The domain of ECCE in India has remained largely unregulated. There is no uniform law or policy that regulates their establishment, functioning or imposes regulatory standards on either Anganwadis or pre-schools. Moreover, different ministries are responsible for the Anganwadi system and the pre-school system. It is not necessary to secure a right in order to further good quality ECCE. However, in the absence of a clear law or policy on ECCE, even courts seem reluctant to adjudicate upon the issue. Therefore, the pressing need for formulating a comprehensive policy that details out the manner of establishment, sets uniform standards and regulates the functioning of preschools and Anganwadis cannot be overlooked.



<sup>13</sup>W.P. (C) 15678 of 2013 High Court of Karnataka

<sup>14</sup>Supra at n. 5

<sup>15</sup>"The glitches that dog RTE implementation", the Hindu (March 31, 2013) available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/the-glitches-that-dog-rte-implementation/article4564801.ece>

<sup>16</sup>"All Anganwadis in Karnataka will have toilets by next June, says Court", The Hindu (August 20, 2013) available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/all-anganwadis-in-karnataka-will-have-toilets-by-june-next-says-court/article5039280.ece>



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# Early Childhood Education – Possibilities for the way forward

Venita Kaul

## Introduction

The National Policy on Education (1986) has acknowledged Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children below 6 years to be not only the first step in the Education ladder, but also a significant input for primary education. ECCE as a stage of education is now globally being considered as extending up to 8 years, since from the child development perspective, children in the 6 to 8 age group are known to be similar in their needs and characteristics to the younger age group and require similar pedagogical approaches. ECCE is visualised as an integrated, holistic programme for children which includes provisions of education, care, health and nutrition. Within this ECCE stage, three sub stages have been identified --- (a) Early Stimulation stage for children 3 years and below, who require home based stimulating environments and care; (b) Early Childhood Education stage for children between 3 to 6 years requiring a holistic centre - based early childhood education programme and (c) Early Primary stage for children between 6 to 8 years, corresponding to grades 1 and 2.


There is now adequate empirical evidence from research in neuroscience, economics and education, globally and within the country, to prove that participation in pre-school education not only has lifelong impact, but also in more immediate terms, has a positive effect on children's retention, attendance and performance at the primary stage. It is further established that school readiness experiences facilitate adjustment and learning in the primary grades, particularly in the context of EFA, wherein diverse groups of first generation learners are coming into the school system without adequate linguistic and cognitive preparedness. Early childhood education thus contributes significantly not only to providing the child a sound foundation for life in these critical years, but also in the attainment of the primary education goals. It

can therefore serve as a very effective investment for realizing the vision of the RTE.

Early Childhood Education has two major objectives--(i) to promote all round development of children through an age/developmentally appropriate programme of play based activities, interactions and experiences which will provide a sound foundation for lifelong learning and development and (ii) to develop in children school readiness through some specific kinds of concept and skill based activities which will foster readiness for learning of the 3R's, prior to entry to primary schooling. It is not a programme for formal teaching of the 3 R's. The school readiness objective is particularly appropriate for children between the ages of four to six years, because by this age children are maturationally ready for a more structured, yet play based, learning environment.

## Early Childhood Education in the XI Five Year Plan (FYP)

There have been some significant developments in the course of the XI FYP, which have implications for Early Childhood Education. In 2006, at the policy level, the subject of ECCE in the Business Allocation Rules was shifted in GOI from MHRD to MWCD. Subsequently, a major landmark in the last few years has been the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, (RTE 2009), which came into effect from 1st April, 2010. Although this Act presently excludes children below six years, it also specifies under its Section 11 that, "*with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide ECCE, appropriate Government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre - school education for such children*". ECCE has also subsequently been included as a constitutional provision through the amended Article 45, which now reads as follows: "*The State shall endeavour to provide ECCE for all children until they complete the*



*age of six years*". These developments have to an extent highlighted the emerging significance of ECCE and, within it, of pre-school education, as the foundation for children's education and development.

### **Current Status of Early Childhood Education in India**

A major landmark in the area of ECCE has been the approval of the recent National Policy on ECCE which was notified in September, 2013 by the ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. The policy is accompanied by a National Curriculum Framework and Quality Standards for ECCE. These policy level initiatives raise hope and optimism for the expansion and quality control in this sector.

Over the course of the XI FYP there has been a quantum jump in pre-school enrolment from 21 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010). More recent ASER data (2010) indicates that 83.6 percent of 3 to 6 year olds in the rural areas are enrolled in some or the other preschool programme, including in the private pre-schools. While data reliability may be an issue with all sources, the progress is distinctly evident. To some extent this may be attributed to the rapid expansion of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and its universalization and alongside to the rapidly expanding private provisions, even in tribal and rural areas across many states. A recent study by Center for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi and ASER Center in Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Rajasthan has demonstrated that an anganwadi was found in every village visited, while private pre-school provisions were also expanding by leaps and bounds. (IECEI, 2013)

In terms of coverage, provisions for centre based Early Childhood Education in India are available through three distinct channels i.e. public, private and voluntary sectors. Under the public sector the major programme is the ICDS, for which the nodal Ministry is MWCD. Early childhood education which is one of its six services, is characteristically very minimalist in terms of quality of both content and facilities and is considered across states as its weakest component. The programme is currently reaching out to more than 73 million children below six years of age through its network of nearly 12 lakh

AWCs. In addition to these, under the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme, 22038 crèches have been sanctioned by the Government of India. (MWCD 2011) which, in some cases, provide pre-school education too in addition to custodial care. SSA also supports 14, 235 ECE centres in non-ICDS areas which cover approximately 48,6605 children across the country in addition to another 4367 ECCE centres in Educationally Backward Blocks covering 92,523 children under the NPEGEL programme. (NPEGEL Progress Report, June 2011). SSA has also been funding some quality strengthening initiatives like training of AW workers, provision of materials etc.

Although no reliable estimates are available, recent rapid surveys indicate that the private sector is steadily expanding and penetrating even into the rural and tribal areas as a provider of pre-school education (AUD, 2011). As per ASER survey of 2010, 11.4% of children residing in rural areas are on an average receiving pre-primary education from private initiatives, which in some states may be considerably higher. Surveys indicate that these low fee charging private pre-schools are in most cases characterized by serious inadequacies like overcrowded class rooms and developmentally inappropriate curricula, which can even be detrimental for children. (CECED, 2013) Apart from private ventures, there are national and local NGO initiatives which get financial assistance from grant-in-aid schemes of the government and national and international aid agencies. There is no reliable data on the coverage of this sector.

### **Analysis of Issues in Early Childhood Education**

While enrolments have increased over the years in ECE, issues of quality, equity and capacity continue to be significant. The overriding concern is that a large number of children may be coming into primary schools, without attending pre-school, or attending but not getting adequate preparation for the primary curriculum in terms of school readiness. This situation invites an analysis of what are the issues that have led to this status of early childhood education in the country, despite several policy and programmatic provisions. Some significant issues are as follows:

- (a) Lack of appreciation in the public sector of the need for age appropriate interventions for children within each sub stage of early

childhood in terms of their growing needs and capacities and the tendency in public and voluntary sectors to address the 3 to 6 year olds as one common level.

- (b) Inadequate priority to early childhood education in ICDS, resulting in its perception universally as a nutrition programme and significant challenges in its due to a single untrained and overworked worker required to deliver on multi-sectoral components requiring completely diverse skills, with poor infrastructural facilities and resources.
- (c) Shifts in parental aspirations towards English medium private pre-schools, evident in steady migration even in rural and tribal areas, of 4 to 5 year olds from the AWs to the private pre-schools, or in some cases primary schools due to the mid-day meal programme. Some state governments like Nagaland, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, at their own initiative, have added pre-school classes to the primary schools to counter/meet this spiralling community demand.
- (d) Absence of any guidelines, resource materials or standards of quality till recently in Early childhood Education which has led to a minimalist approach in public sector programmes and a laissez faire situation in private sector provisions, with developmentally inappropriate practices by way of down ward extension of primary education. Both scenarios can be counter-productive and detrimental for children's development and education.
- (e) Lack of institutional capacity in early childhood education, particularly at the state, district and sub district levels to plan, implement, support or monitor the provisions.
- (f) Linked to institutional capacity is the complete absence of any MIS or data base on ECCE which could support the planning or evaluation process.

A major factor responsible for these issues persisting is that there has so far been no centrally sponsored scheme and dedicated funding for early childhood education which could have addressed many of the systemic concerns discussed above holistically. In the context of Early Childhood education, the NAC has made a recommendation

that children up to 4 years could be provided ECCE experiences through the ICDS in the AW with an additional worker, and a year of pre-primary class be attached to every primary school to ensure school readiness for all children. If the age for Grade 1 gets raised to six years in all states as per the RTE, this would amount to 2 years of school based early childhood education which, if adequately provided for, could contribute significantly to a sound foundation for learning for all children.

#### **Suggestions for the way forward**

In view of the above considerations, a major shift proposed in the XII FYP has been to extend the RTE entitlements downwards to include the early childhood stage of education. In addition it is also recommended that early childhood education for 4 to 6 year olds should be brought into the fold of primary education or integrated in a 'bottom up' not 'top down' mode with it as a school readiness programme for children, prior to their entering grade 1. However, this proposal is currently become dormant and needs to see the light of the day.

Further to this some suggestions that may be considered are as follows:

1. All States need to be encouraged to fix the age of entry to Grade 1 uniformly at 6 years to align with the RTE stipulation, so that in the 23 states which have the entry age at present at 5 years, the 5 year olds will be placed in an early childhood education centre/class for school readiness. As per recent ASER survey (2010) over 60 percent of five year olds are in primary schools and not in AWs across the country in the rural sector.
2. Anganwadi Centres need to be upgraded into Early Childhood Care and Education centres in line with the new policy, with basic infrastructure, professional training of a dedicated worker in ECCE and age appropriate early stimulation and education curriculum and materials for children below 4 years, which is the most critical age for brain development.
3. Every primary school needs to have a pre-primary section for 4 to 6 year olds for which adequate resources need to be apportioned to be able to provide a sound developmentally appropriate school readiness programme of acceptable quality to children. It may be noted that school readiness does not imply teaching of the 3 R's at the pre-school stage. This practice of

extending the primary curriculum downwards has been found to be very detrimental for children's learning and development. Instead, school readiness refers to certain cognitive, linguistic concepts and skills as well as a positive disposition towards learning, which through play and activity prepares the child to learn the 3 R's more effectively later in the primary grades.

4. The concept of an 'Early learning unit' should be introduced which would bring together the pre-primary and early primary grades into an integrated unit, to allow for planned 'bottom up' continuity in curriculum (which should be developmentally appropriate, non-formal and play-based) as well as allow for flexibility to promote individually paced learning, thus contributing to a sound foundation for every child. Learnings from good practices from within and outside the country related to this concept e.g. Activity-Based Learning programme, Nali-Kali etc. will inform this curricular shift. This shift is not envisaged as requiring any structural or administrative changes in the school system; instead it will focus primarily on shifts in curriculum and pedagogy with introduction of graded materials and related teacher preparation and support.
5. The NCTE model curriculum for Diploma in ECE teacher education already reflects this integrated concept as it covers teacher preparation for both pre-school and grades 1 and 2 in its scope. This should be further

reviewed, strengthened and customised to support the early learning unit concept and to ensure appropriate teacher preparation. NCTE will need to lay down standard qualifications and adapt its TET guidelines to accommodate the teachers of this Early Learning Stage i.e. pre-primary and Grades 1 and 2. States will need to be encouraged to modify their recruitment rules for teachers so that they appoint the graduates of this Diploma as teachers for the Early Learning Stage i.e., Pre-school and Grades 1 and 2.

6. A system of regulation of quality of pre-schools across the public, private and voluntary sectors will be required to be instituted along with a strong advocacy component for all stakeholders to correct the current misconceptions regarding quality of education and ensure all children get equitable and developmentally appropriate pre-school education.

While children will be supported to become ready for school, schools will also need to be made ready for children by being made more child friendly with dedicated and trained teachers and stimulating play and learning materials and classrooms for the early grades. Simultaneously, the resource capacities at the higher institutional levels will also have to be strengthened in Early Childhood Education, particularly at district and block levels, through partnerships with civil society organizations and professionals to ensure regular on-going resource support and wider community participation.



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# Nutrition, Health and Education in Early Years

Shreelata Rao Seshadri and Suraj Ankush Parab



## Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, nutrition plays a fundamental role from the earliest stages of fetal development across the human lifespan. Nutritious food is essential not only for survival but contributes to the person's physical and mental well-being. In children, nutrition is pivotal. If a child is not given nutritious food from an early age it can have severe impact on its physical growth, cognitive ability and performance of the brain (Figure 1). A malnourished child is at a high risk for a wide range of health problems such as metabolic impairment, compromised immunity and developmental disorders, including attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia and autistic spectrum disorders. Right nutrition can have a profound impact on a child's ability to grow, learn and rise out of poverty. It also benefits society, by boosting productivity and improving economic prospects for families and communities.

The vicious cycle of malnutrition, poor health and poor education can create inter-generational disadvantage. A malnourished, unhealthy and uneducated mother often gives birth to a child with low birth weight; the child after birth is not properly breast-fed, immunized, introduced to supplementary food on time or given sufficient quantity and good quality food; the child grows up in unhygienic conditions with poor water and sanitation facilities because of which the child is more likely to face repeated episodes of ill-health; this negatively impacts the child's ability to participate in the educational system, handicapping the child for life and leads to low productivity and poverty.

Malnutrition is the underlying cause of 2.3 million deaths worldwide every year, and for millions more children it contributes to failures in cognitive and educational development. As a result, the life

chances of millions of children around the world are devastated. 19,000 children die every day from preventable diseases and 130 million students are in school but failing to learn even the basics. Malnutrition levels in India are among the highest in the world, twice the level of sub Saharan Africa and 6 times more than China. Among South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, India leads in the percentage of underweight (a child whose weight is too low for their age), stunted (a child who is too short for her age) and wasted (a child whose weight is too low for their height) children. As per the NFHS-3 data, in India 48% of children under the age of 5 are stunted, 43% underweight and 20% are wasted. Furthermore the figures are much higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas and for disadvantaged groups like schedule tribes, schedule caste and poor. An alarming 30% babies in India are born with low birth weight, which is double the prevalence of low birth in the world; 36% women are chronically under-nourished and 55% anemic.

## Inter linkage between Nutrition, Health and Education:

Nutrition, Health and Education are crucial for a child's holistic growth and development. They are often dealt with as different topics but we need to ask: are they so different from each other? Do they not all belong under the same umbrella – social protection? Are we not focusing on the same target - the child?

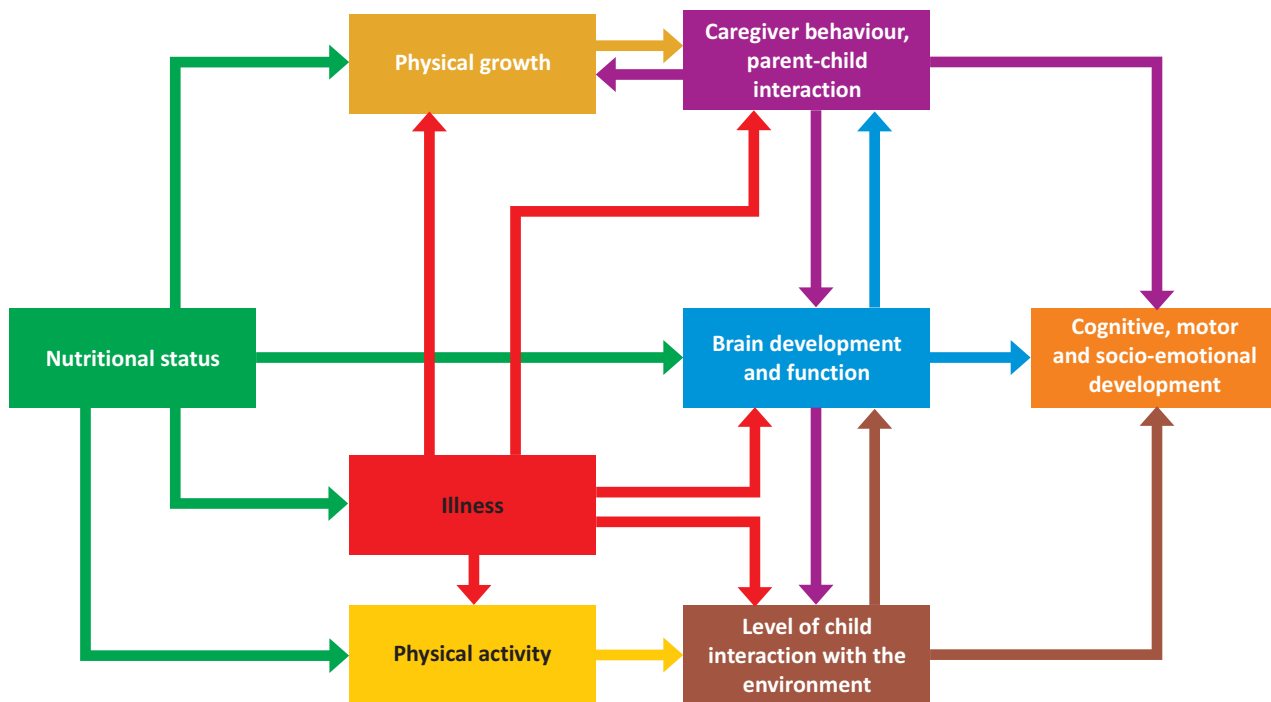
Nutrition, Health and Education are interlinked: malnourished children score 7% lower in math test and are 19% less likely to be able to read a simple sentence aged 8, are 12% less likely to be able to write a simple sentence and are 13% less likely to be in the appropriate grade for their age at school.

Recognizing the crucial interplay between health, nutrition and education, particularly in the context of schools, the UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and the

World Bank launched the Focus Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH) School Health and Nutrition Framework in 2000 as part of a global initiative to integrate school health and nutrition

into schools. Data from developing countries across the world showed that about 200 million school years were being lost every year due to ill health and poor nutrition.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
Potential mechanisms for the effect of nutrient deficiency on children’s cognitive, motor and socio-emotional development



Source: Elizabeth Prado and Kathryn Dewey (2012) Adapted from Levitsky & Barnes (1972) and Pollitt (1993) [www.savethechildchildren.org.ink](http://www.savethechildchildren.org.ink) Food for Thought

**Programs in India:**

India is a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989. Apart from this, the government has supported the Right to Education, the Right to Food as well as a proposal for Universal Health Coverage. This has resulted in some progress: the net enrolment ratio in primary school has increased to 98.99%; however, the quality of education, and the ability of children to learn due to poor nutrition and health continue to be areas of concern. There are several loopholes in government policies, including poor availability of data and evidence, poor training and capacity building of workers, and poor inter-sectoral coordination among the concerned departments .

Several programs have been launched by Government of India to resolve the issue of malnutrition, better health and education of the children. The major ‘centrally sponsored schemes’ are:

**Antyodaya Anna Yojana:**

(A scheme of highly subsidized grain for the poorest of poor)

Eligible beneficiaries are identified and provided a supply of food grains .

**Integrated Child Development Scheme:**

(An integrated programme looking at health, nutrition and education of children under the age of six)

Pregnant women, lactating women and adolescent girls are also covered in this programme): Prescribed minimum norms for food are to be given

<sup>1</sup> Bundy D (2011). Rethinking School Health – A Key Component of Education for All. World Bank, Washington DC.

daily to children, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women. The scheme also directs that there should be an anganwadi (a childcare centre) in each settlement and all existing centres should be made fully functional immediately.

#### **Midday Meal Scheme:**

(School meal programme for children in government and aided primary schools)

All children in all government and government aided primary schools should be provided fresh cooked meals on all working days and for at least 200 days in a year.

#### **Targeted Public Distribution Scheme**

(A scheme for moderately subsidized grain for poor people)

Eligible beneficiaries are identified, ration cards provided and supply of grains made available monthly. The design and provisions of the scheme differ from state to state, but the objective is to provide foodgrains to the poorest households.

Even though government has taken many steps to enhance access to health services, better nutrition, and quality education, there have been several shortfalls in the implementation of the policies and programs. There have been many shortfalls in government's policies and implementation of these programs. The schemes needs to be strengthened, investment should be increased, made accessible to each and every one, and ANMs, ASHAs and Anganwadi workers need to be strengthened with better compensation, training and infrastructure.

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Shreelata is part of the Health, Nutrition and Development Initiative at the Azim Premji University, and her research interests include health systems development and the linkage between health, nutrition and education. She is leading a study on the determinants of dietary choice and nutritional outcomes among school children in rural Karnataka. She is also interested in the use of evidence in health sector decision making; providing policy guidance on the most cost-effective strategies to reduce avertable death and disability; and transparency and governance issues in the health sector. She has contributed to the development and writing of the Karnataka Health Status Report (November 2010) and will continue to be involved in the implementation of its recommendations. She can be contacted at [shreelata.seshadri@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:shreelata.seshadri@azimpremjifoundation.org)

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There is also a need to strengthen the Primary Health Centres, recruit teachers and give proper training for quality education for all.

#### **Conclusion:**

In the final analysis, all these programs are aimed at the same beneficiaries. At the level of the community, the programs are delivered through the schools, the health sub-centers/primary health centers, and the Anganwadi. Each of these centers has its own infrastructure and community workers, apart from other paraphernalia. If these community level people and structures could work together and have a common mission in terms of their pool of beneficiaries, their reach and impact could be multiplied many fold. At the moment, unfortunately, each program works in its own separate silo, with little engagement with the concerns of the other. Bridging these barriers should be one of the goals for which we strive.





# Early Childhood Education - Coming Out of the Flux

Kinnari Pandya & Jigisha Shastri



*In this article, we sketch the status of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs in the country and discuss the various levels at which professionals are engaged in the delivery of ECE programs. We further recommend some core theoretical understandings that professionals working in ECE ought to know with the assumption that ECE as a domain of study in Higher Education has the potential to change the quality of ECE programs offered to children on the ground. We recommend and hope that with the national thrust on ECCE there will be more rigorous efforts to offer Higher Education programs to ECE professionals.*

India is at the threshold of change in Early Childhood Education, with the notification of the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in September 2013. This recognition of the importance of early years, while late, we hope will give fresh impetus to high-quality and universal ECCE across the country. In absence of a regulatory mechanism till date, there has been a mushrooming growth of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers in the country over the last two decades. The assumption that there is nothing special in knowing about children – that, “We all were children once and we have children of our own, so we know about them and what to do for them” has driven many people into the lucrative business of preparing children for ‘schooling’. With a (genuine) need for children to ‘start early’, with making them literate (if we may call knowing ‘A, B, C...and 1, 2, 3...’) and prepare them for school, most ECE programs are developed as downward spiral of elementary education with a few songs and stories to go along. People with folk understanding of child rearing, and no or little knowledge of developmental processes of learning and teaching, equally participate in ECE programs, resulting in a mixed set of programs being available to the community at large – both in rural and urban the same.

On the other hand, developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive programs exist in Laboratory schools of University Departments in the country, some interesting programs run by NGOs and private schools. We also find ECE programs that have emerged following a specific ideology and practice promoted by philosophers such as Maria Montessori and others. But these are still a handful. Alongside, there are the government run Anganwadi centers as a part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme that are expected to implement an ECE component while catering to other aspects such as nutrition and health under the scheme. Thus, we can see multiple tracks operating within the ECE space in India.

Parents and community in today’s competitive and English language driven scenario prefer programs that will help the child ‘fit’ in the school setting. Nevertheless, the nature and quality of program being offered still remains a responsibility of the owners of the pre-school. Whereas, if quality developmentally appropriate programs are to be made available, the government needs to put into place a regulatory mechanism. The academia of the country needs to recognize early years education as an important area for higher education, research and development.

Many people, (we would refer to them as ‘professionals’ hereafter) participate in different capacities to make an ECE program available to young children. Here, we will discuss the various levels at which these professionals contribute, and the kind of education they would require in order to offer quality program to young children of our country.

We list a few kinds of professionals engaged at various levels - from those who directly engage with children to those who are far removed in terms of direct engagement:

- The teacher/caregiver who is directly engaging with children on a day-to-day basis. They are also referred to as grass root level or frontline functionaries - they are the Anganwadi workers in ICDS system, and the teacher in every private or government run pre-school.
- The second group is the supervisor group. They are in direct contact with the caregivers i.e. the Anganwadi workers. They monitor the day-to-day activities of the caregivers and ideally should also be mentors to them. Large pre-school chains may have curriculum developers and pre-school program coordinators for each age group.
- The third group is at the highest level within the ECE program group. Within the ICDS scheme they are the Child Development Project Officers (CDPO). They monitor large number of Anganwadis and ideally should be leaders for implementing quality services. They guide the supervisors. In private pre-schools they are the Principals or Heads of Pre-school programs.
- The fourth group in the ladder is the teacher trainer group. Under the ICDS scheme, they design and implement programs to train the different cadres of people. In the private sector, they are trainers at the institutes of nursery teachers training that train pre-school teachers.

Over and above these four categories of professionals that would be more or less directly involved with an early years program (either ICDS or others in the private space); the field of Early Childhood needs qualified professionals who can support policy development, advocate ECE and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE); designers of learning materials, toys and books for children; researchers and so on. In order to work effectively at each of these levels, thorough understanding of ECE as a domain of study would be necessary.

It is unfortunate that in our country, since Early Childhood Education as a field of practice has remained unorganized and unregulated, the field as a discipline of study and enquiry has also found limited attention. Given this history, there is dearth of quality higher education programs for people involved at each of the above levels. Specialized training in ECE as a domain will enable development of quality ECE curriculum, and design spaces that provide opportunities to young children for

development of physical-motor, psycho-social, cognitive and creative domains. The design and selection of materials for children will be age as well as domain appropriate. Professionals with understanding of ECE will be able to develop training programs, and provide trainings to future teachers of young children, and administrators of the ECE institutions. Having discussed so far 'why' higher education in ECE is the need of the hour, we now present 'what' should encompass a quality higher education program.

Quality ECE programs for young children would demand an academically deep and theoretically rigorous understanding of the why, when, what and how of early years education. Therefore, while the content and nature of training program would vary depending on the needs and role expectations of each level of professional on field, there would be some core theoretical content that will remain common and foundational in an ECE higher education program curriculum. Also, an important element that should run through all programs is direct engagement and practice of working with children. A substantial part of the program; almost equal per cent as that of theory should be designed in a manner that participants have an opportunity for hands on experience with children, observing them, assessing children, designing learning materials, practice in designing programs and so on.

The core theoretical aspects could be broadly divided into three areas. i.e. understanding development of children, curriculum for early years and working with young children. Within each of these broad areas, some specific theoretical content that will need focus are:



*Understanding Growth and Development of Children; Domains of Development; Process of Learning for Children; Factors Influencing Children; Philosophies of Early Childhood; Theories of Child Development; and Involvement of Parent and Community*

Research as well as practice indicates that every individual who works with and for children should be aware about these basic aspects on children and childhood.

Other important subject matter content on working with children and curriculum that will need attention in a program on ECE would be: *Guiding Children's Growth, Behavior and Development; Learning Outcomes for Children and Related Experiences; Curriculum and Assessment; Music Movement and Story For Children; Ethical Considerations in Working With Young Children; Understanding Cultural Contexts, Inclusion of Gender and Children With Special Needs; Research with Young Children*

While engaging with each of these specific curricular components, two important elements would have to be woven across: understanding the socio-cultural diversity of children, and ethical considerations for working with children. Everyone concerned with ECE programs would need to understand the varied contexts of children in our country such as rural, urban, tribal, family type, diversity of caste, class, language, gender and so on. The educational programs should help professionals understand this complex diversity of children in pre-school settings and celebrate the individuality that children bring with them. All programs of early childhood education, for all cadres of professionals have to help them recognize, appreciate, be sensitive to every child.

Settings that engage with young children and their education would need firm ethical basis for action in varied situations. There is a need for people who would follow ethical approaches while working with young children, and take ethical decisions in case of dilemmas.

In addition to all of the above, those in supervisory positions, who execute, monitor and mentor others, will need both theoretical and practical understanding of these processes. They would need

to understand the difference between monitoring and mentoring and how these interplay in practice.

This understanding of the domain of early childhood education will impact the formulation, execution as well as monitoring of ECE programs. The decisions made by all practitioners in Anganwadis or pre-schools, or by policy makers and advocates will not be ad hoc, but based on strong theoretical grounding and practical relevance. The actions on the ground will have some firm basis and may result in reasonably predictable outcomes. It will help recognize the need, and offer programs for 'holistic development' of young children in pre-school set-ups and not merely for preparing children to 'fit' school.

To conclude, the child and her holistic development ought to be at the center of every process in an early childhood program. While our rich cultural practices provide some insights to work with children, in-order to provide quality experience to all children in early years, professionally trained individuals on specific content knowledge of the domain are needed at all levels that operate in the ECE space. The intention of our policy makers is clear with the thrust on ECE in the 12th five year plan, as well as the approval of National Policy on ECCE. The need for trained professionals in the area is even more apparent if quality inputs are to be given on the ground in order to achieve the standards that are laid down in the National Policy. Higher Education in our country has been successful in recognizing Elementary Education and Teacher Education as important areas of study. It is time that Early Childhood Education also achieves its due.





Photo Credit: Medak ECE Initiative Team, Azim Premji Foundation

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# Gender Rights in Early Childhood

Mina Swaminathan

Early childhood, the period from conception up to the age of about six years, is now known to be the most significant stage of life, from the point of view of human development, and neglect or trauma at this stage can lead to serious damage, sometimes permanent. Five issues can be conceptualized as the rights of the young child, seen from a gender perspective, or, to put it differently, gender discrimination through the young child's lens.

1. The first one is the right to be born a girl.
2. The second is to the right to be born healthy.
3. The third is the right to mother's milk - the child's right to be breast-fed and the mother's right to breast feed
4. The fourth is the right to care (including development and education) in early childhood
5. The fifth is the right of the child's caregiver to recognition and reward


## 1. Sex selection

Though both infant and child mortality have fallen dramatically during the last few decades, - IMR from 129 per 1,000 live births in 1971 down to 47 in 2010, and CMR from 51.9 per 1,000 in 1971 down to 13.3 in 2010 (Census of India), a disturbing trend is the increasingly adverse juvenile sex ratio, which has been falling steadily in the last forty years. From 962 females per 1000 males, it has steadily declined - 945/1,000 in 1991, 927/1,000 in 2001 and an all-time low of 914 per 1,000 males in 2011 (Census of India). Various groups give alarming estimates of the number of "missing" girls in India every year, and one such estimate states it to be of the order of 4.15 million girls between 1 and 15 (Genderbytes, Wordpress). Much of this gap can be attributed to female infanticide in earlier decades, and later on, to sex-selection followed by abortion. So much so, that one wonders whether a female child even has the right to be born! — the most extreme case of gender discrimination.

Since sex selection concerns gender, and takes place before the child is born, it affects, not child rights, but women's rights. A woman's right to abortion is clearly defined and protected by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act - which clearly states the three main reasons which make a termination of pregnancy appropriate and legally acceptable for abortion—and sex of the fetus certainly is not one of reasons! Going further, another Act - PCPNDT (Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques) Act - clearly states that sex selection is forbidden. The fact that it continues shows how anti-woman our society has become, in spite of constant public posturing about the role of goddesses and worship of the female deity. Clearly, many women are obliged to, rather than prefer to, abort a fetus of the female sex, because they are coerced to do so, and are not in a position to resist.

It is sad but true that advanced scientific technology has been dramatically used against women. Scientists will claim that science in itself is neutral, and is not either for or against anyone; this may be true in the strictest sense, but scientists are human beings, belonging to a society, and their values and attitudes are inevitably governed by the kind of beliefs and attitudes they have been exposed to through their social experience. It is notable that very few medical professionals have come out openly against these malpractices and one would not be wrong in coming to the conclusion that the majority of them, especially, in the private sector, also the most admired and influential sector, have been complicit in this crime.

While working with the campaigns organised by CASSA (Campaign Against Sex Selective Abortion) in Tamil Nadu in the '90s and later, one often found women gynecologists, who obviously used ultrasonic tests during pregnancy for various (both defensible and indefensible) reasons, ranged against male pediatricians, who spoke out for saving



and protecting lives and improving the health of the concerned infants. An ironic twist was that many of these medical professionals were couples on either side of the professional divide married to each other! - the mind boggles at the thought of whether and how the peace of their domestic lives together was disturbed by disputes on these issues!

## 2. Low Birth Weight

Globally, nearly 15% of infants are born with low birth weight (LBW) that is, less than 2,500 gms. Of these, more than half are in South Asia, and out of those, 75% are in India, adding up to 8.3 million LBW infants per year. There has been little significant decline in the last few years. (UNICEF 2006) NFHS III estimated in 2005-06 that nearly 21% of all births were LBW (NFHS III), Low birth weight, arising from maternal under-nutrition, especially in the last trimester of pregnancy, is linked to a range of negative outcomes – on brain development, body growth and composition, and metabolic development in the short run, leading to lower cognitive ability, (likely to affect future educational performance,) immunity to disease and work capacity in the long run. It is a cruel but spectacular illustration of the old saying -The sins of the fathers are visited on the children. In this case, this happens quite literally. The failure to feed and care adequately for the pregnant woman, for any reason, especially during the last trimester, leads to low birth weight in the child at birth.

There have been, naturally, very few long-term follow-up studies of low birth weight infants to indicate how and in what way their future development is affected; besides, this would be unethical, as in humane terms, every effort should be made to try and make up for the deficiency when discovered, rather than follow them up without any remedial action. However, the propensity to develop certain diseases like diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease in later life has also been shown by recent researches. (Bhat et al, 2013.) Barker et al (2007), who followed a cohort in Helsinki also found that small size at birth followed by accelerated growth from 3-11 years led to similar results, as well as poor responses to stressful living conditions in later life. Chaudhuri et al (2004), tracked a group of LBW children and found them to be poorer in intelligence, visual-motor performance, motor competence and school performance, with learning disability in both

reading and mathematics, in comparison to the control children. Thus, it seems that a series of problems both in childhood, at school, and in later adult life can be linked to low birth weight as well as maternal under-nutrition, thus making poor maternal health itself a proxy indicator of gender discrimination. Here again such discrimination starts very early in life, much before birth, but has long-term consequences.

## 3. Exclusive Breast feeding

Exclusive breast feeding is now recommended for infants from birth up to the age of six months, followed by continued breast feeding up to the age of two years along with complementary foods - a recommendation approved and advocated by WHO. Yet the rates of exclusive breast feeding in India are very low.

Exclusive breastfeeding requires close and continuous proximity between mother and child throughout the day, since young children feed at irregular intervals, and also for mother-child bonding, which is the essential first step in psychosocial development.

But this may not always be possible for poor working mothers. Women's compulsions arise out of having to engage not only in productive work, both paid and unpaid, but also in home management and housework, and above all, the invisible but time-consuming work of care---not only of children, but also of the old, sick, disabled and animals in the household. Yet it is only of late that the term "women's unpaid care work" has come into use, and its timing, extent and variety is beginning to be assessed. The Time Use Study methodology offers immense scope to document this largely invisible burden of work, but has been little used so far. However, it already offers us tantalizing glimpses, such as, that while Indian men enjoy two hours leisure in a day, women only get five minutes per day (CSO) and that further, while the average Indian man works nine hours a day, the average Indian woman works for fourteen hours a day! How then do women find time for exclusive breastfeeding?

The Maternity Benefit Act, for instance, is only applicable to the organized sector, in which only 11 percent of the female work force is engaged. Only maternity entitlements for all women will enable the lactating mother to stay out of the labour force for a long enough period, and thus not only facilitate

## Breast feeding status by age (youngest children under three years living with mother)

Age (months)	Not breastfeeding	Exclusively breastfed	Plain water only	Non-milk liquids / juice	Other milk	Complementary foods
<2	2.7	69	16.2	2.6	7.8	1.7
2 – 3	1.5	50.9	23.1	4.9	14.6	5.0
4-5	1.5	27.6	25.6	6.4	20.2	18.6
6-8	4.0	9.7	18.8	3.2	11.6	52.7

*Breastfeeding status refers to a 24-hour period (yesterday and last night) Children classified as breastfeeding and consuming plain water only, consumed no liquid or solid supplements. The categories of not breastfeeding, exclusively breastfed, breastfeeding and consuming plain water, non –milk liquid/juice, other milk and complementary foods (solids and semi - solids) are hierarchical and mutually exclusive and their percentages add up to 100 per cent. (NFHS III, 2006)*

breast feeding but also strengthen the mother-child bonding. The National Food Security Act (2013) does indeed, and commendably, for the first time, offer maternity entitlements of nine months duration (the last three months of pregnancy and six months after childbirth) to all women, but the amount offered – a paltry fixed sum of “not less than Rs.1,000” (likely to be interpreted as just that and no more) is hardly adequate to enable any woman to stay off the work force for more than a few days, at today’s prices. Another cruel irony—at last she is recognized as a mother and gets a maternity entitlement—but its “too little too late”, and so of little use to her. Exclusive breast feeding is one of the several issues which cannot be solved till the issue of “women’s unpaid care work” is confronted and dealt with.

### 4. Day care

The fourth issue goes beyond the family and enters the institutional arena of providing the needed services for adequate child care to all mothers. The child below two years not only needs food adequate in quantity and quality, as well as continued breastfeeding, but has to be fed at frequent intervals during the day. Four or five feeds (if not more), taking approximately twenty minutes each, along with the time needed for preparation, storage, and reheating (when necessary), would amount to 2-3 hours per day. How can a poor working woman find time for all this during her busy working day? Many poor working women are absent from home for long hours, often leaving the young child in the care of older siblings; this lack not only becomes a major cause of child malnutrition, disease and mortality, but also deprives the older

child of school education. And food is only one of the many elements of child care.

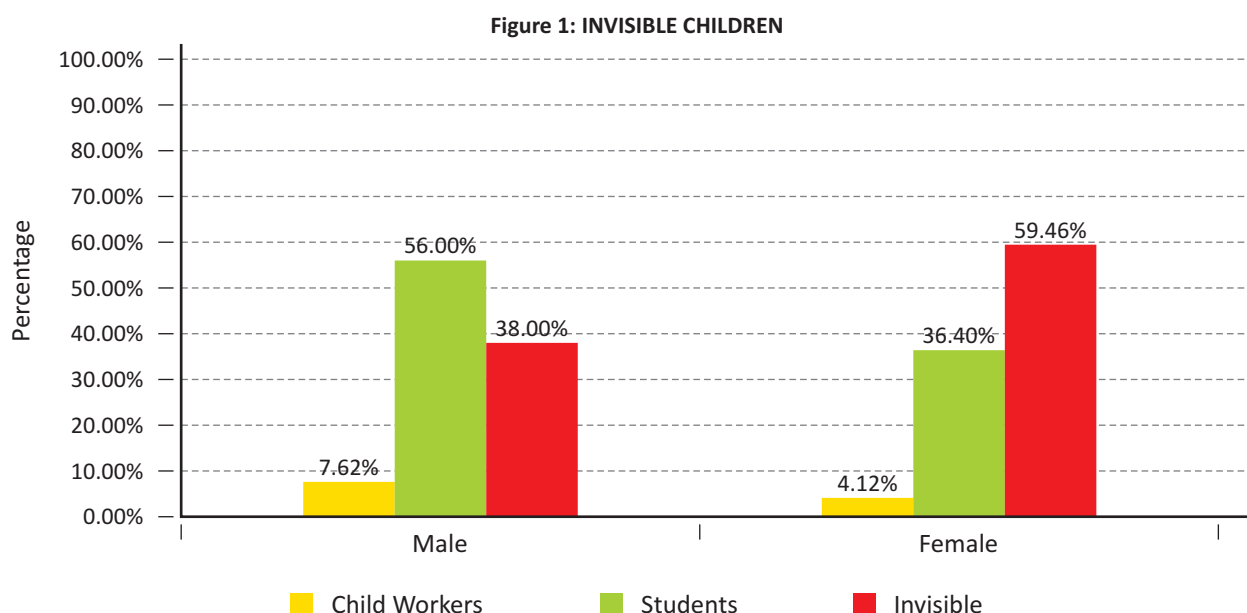
Our child care services, however, have been unable to address this issue, arguing endlessly about how to get the food to the child, rather than how to feed and take care of the child. The debate about “take-home” food and “on-the-spot” feeding has been going on for years. In the first approach, the disadvantage is that the food might be shared by the whole family; while in the second case, the child cannot finish the full daily portion of food in a short time. The underlying reason for the impasse is that the ICDS is “service-based”, not “care-based”, and has not yet conceived of the possibility of day care services for young children which would enable them to be both fed and cared for while their mothers are at work. With 11.5 crores of women in the work force, (ninety percent of whom are in the unorganized sector) and about 3.5 crores of them estimated to have children below six, day care would seem to make obvious sense as a solution. Besides, day care would also allow the sibling caregivers, especially girls, to go to school.

An ILO study (1996) estimated that about 38 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls can be termed “invisible children”, that is, they are neither at school nor at work. Girls are almost double the number of boys in this category. A good guess would be that many of them, especially the girls, would be involved in care of younger siblings and this is an impediment to their education. So day care makes sense for this group too. But in its absence, the price is paid by young children, older girls and women - here too one can see gender discrimination at work.

## 5. The right to recognition and reward for work

Finally, an emerging issue-that of gender discrimination within child care services, which are largely handled by women, while little gender discrimination is found in the case of other professionals like health care and education professionals. There are more than three million female child care workers in the country (as well as the same number of helpers) whose status is deplorable, by any standards, keeping in mind their huge contributions to society. Still not considered "workers", but mere "volunteers"; receiving a dole of a petty amount as "honorarium" rather than a "wage" for toiling for children several hours a day, doing multifarious tasks, from sweeping and cleaning to cooking and feeding, taking attendance, height and weight and other measurements, and teaching and caring for young children; their skills

unrecognized and unpaid for; considered to have no need for training, as women should "naturally" be able to take care of children(!); burdened with multifarious duties as their daily work schedule expands; they are a silent and exploited group, denied the training, the wages or the working conditions that skilled workers deserve. If they continue to put up with it, it is only for lack of alternatives. So low are children in the priorities of the nation, that even those who labour for them are not spared. Is it not time to restore their dignity? Not insultingly, by giving them an honour as a recognition now and again, but more meaningfully, by recognizing their work through better wages and working conditions and offering more meaningful capacity building and scope for advancement. Would a similar state of affairs exist if these workers were men? Here comes the bogey of gender again!



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# SECTION B

# WORKING WITH

# YOUNG CHILDREN





# Making Pre-Schools Inclusive

S. Anandalakshmy

Inclusion is a buzz word. It has currency and a feel-good tone. But the method of operating inclusive education largely remains like the letter x in Algebra, the unknown factor!

I present here the case profile of a successful experiment, which demonstrates the possibility of inclusion across age groups and levels of ability.

The Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Child Study Centre and Nursery School was established in 1959 and has served as a living laboratory attached to the Dept. of Child Development at the Lady Irwin College in Delhi. The premises have shifted, but the principles have remained constant. Being an adjunct of a post-graduate section has several obvious advantages for the activities. Around 1980, we got the funds to build a beautiful centre for young children. The architects, Stein, Doshi and Bhalla (among the most admired in Delhi) agreed to construct the building after a discussion with us. We were fortunate to get a positively brilliant Stein original! There was an open grassed over courtyard, large rooms, outdoor play areas, a spacious lawn and a welcoming wicket gate.

## **Admission Policy: a Mirror of our Changing Perspectives**

In the early years, when the Nursery school was a small unit, all the children who applied were admitted. Over the years, as the numbers grew, informal meetings were held with the parents and the child, and quick assessments were made to ensure that the child would benefit from the school. Later, every child's admission was preceded by a few questions to the children and observation of their play with the materials provided. Gradually, before we knew it, these pre-admission meetings became testing sessions for children seeking admission, with children and parents having to respond to some questions. The invisible criteria fell into two main categories: the child's cognitive and social level of

functioning and the parents' involvement in their children's progress. At this time, the children who scored well and the parents who seemed most keen became the choice. Every little child could not be admitted, so some families had to go back disappointed.

At that time, I intervened and asked the Nursery School teachers at a Staff meeting, why we should admit only bright children with competent parents. With our level of expertise and commitment, should we not be able to educate all categories of children? There would be many who would thrive in a good pre-school, but without our kind of input, get nowhere. This was hotly debated, but we finally came to an agreement on the admission policy: that we would give first preference to siblings of the children in the school, children and grandchildren of teachers and College faculty. Since the school was attached to a post-graduate Department of Child Development and also served as a laboratory for the students, we decided to give priority to adopted children and to twins. The remaining spaces would be open.

Since we had decided that no testing would be done, we settled on a first-come-first-served policy for the seats. The queue outside the window for the application forms started forming at 5.00 am on the opening day for issue of forms. Those who could send a person to stand on their behalf got a natural "headstart". There were many peons, drivers and clerks in that line. Some parents had demonstrated both their resourcefulness and their access to economic resources!

In the process, something interesting had happened. The children came from a wide spectrum of abilities and talents. We found we had four or five children with disability (for instance, Down Syndrome, very poor vision, spasticity). We took them in, of course, and immediately created a

special section for them. One of our teachers, who had training, experience and wonderful warmth, took charge. The following year, we gave preference in admission to children with mild or moderate disability and took in five more children, to make it a class of ten.

Each of our sections had a river's name: Kaveri, Yamuna, Narmada and so on. The class of children who needed special attention was called "Sangam".

We still had one problem to face. We found that some of the children had to be picked up from their homes miles away and were sometimes sleepy during school hours. By the time they reached home, we felt, they would surely have been exhausted. It made sense to us that no child should spend more than 30 minutes in the school bus, each way. Or even if they were dropped off in the family car, there should be a moderate time they spent getting to school. So in the following year's admission policy, we decided to take newcomers from a radius of 5 kms. There was some protest from parents and we had to make a concession of a couple of kms. for one or two new admissions. We found out only later that many parents had chosen to give addresses of friends or family living within "the magic circle" just to get their children in. They were always one step ahead of us!

### **The Programmes: Sangam, The Enabling Centre and Day Care**

#### **SANGAM**

From Sangam which had ten children from the ages of 3 to 7, one or two children would come to the main group for activities like music or clay work. This was done after all the children had got fully adjusted to the school and the routines. Sometimes the whole class of Sangam would come as spectators for a dance by the older children. At other times, they would just walk up to the vegetable garden nearby, with one of their teachers. Even though all of them may not have been learning to read and write, they became familiar with the setting and had a feeling of belonging. It was their school. In my view, this was real inclusion, as would happen in any family.

Word got round that we were giving preference for children with special needs, but ours was a fee-paying school. Sometimes a family from the lower middle class would come with their child. If we could take the child in, we would do so and ask one of the

affluent parents if they could support one more child. We rarely met with a refusal. There are many more details one can give, but I will stop here.

#### **THE ENABLING CENTRE**

We did a survey in a two kilometer radius to find out if children of the Primary school age with any kind of sensory or physical disability had dropped out of school or not been to school at all, because of not finding a suitable institution which would take them. To support this section, we applied for a grant under the HRD Ministry's "Innovative and Experimental Programmes in Elementary Education" and were fortunate to get funded for about eight years. We acquired a van with special seat belts in all the seats, so that each child could be picked up from home and dropped back to the doorstep. A variety of activities were planned. A popular one was puppetry by "Jan Madhyam" a voluntary group of talented singers and artistes. We also managed to get some funds from the UGC, under their scheme for Extension activities. The Enabling Centre was intended to demonstrate how to plan school activities for a mixed group of mild and moderate disabilities. We did have many visitors.

#### **DAY CARE**

We found that some mothers of our pre-school children had full time jobs and could not comfortably take their children back after 12 noon. We invited them to leave the children with us for the afternoon session, for an extra fee. We also permitted the older siblings of these children to join them after they had finished regular school. Sometimes even parents who did not have their little ones in our school would ask us to take in their older children into our Day Care. So the Day care centre had a mixed age group, as vertical grouping has come to be called. All the children would get a hot lunch. The young children would be put to sleep, the others would have arts and crafts, games and music, drama and puppetry. This section stayed open until 5.00 pm. This service was most popular with the parents, who found the children were in safe custody, had good company and were under professional caregivers. I feel that this is a model for many schools. Such a programme would become an invaluable asset to the community.

## **UPDATE on the Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Child Study Centre**

- by Sudha Parthasarathi

In 2005, the Golden Jubilee year, SETU, the Systematic Early Training Unit was flagged off to provide early intervention to infants at risk of developing disability (birth onwards).

### **The various services provided by the Centre include the following:**

**Infant Care and Day Care Program**  
(6 months-12 years)

**Kilkari: The Toddlers' Club**  
(6 months-2 years)

**Play Centre** (2-3 years)

**Nursery School** (3-5 years)

**SETU:** Early intervention unit for infants at risk  
(Birth-3 years)

**Educational and remedial programs for children with special needs** (3-12 years)

**Speech and Occupational Therapy**

**Saathi:** The Counselling Cell

### **Personal Development and Training for Youth with Special Needs/Disabilities**

The Centre currently (2013-2014) has a strength of nearly 150 students divided between nine classes. The classes are all named after rivers: Shipra, Narmada, Kaveri, Saryu and Sangam - each class room is a river through which the water flows with no forcing or holding back- an ideology which underlines the Centre's approach to teaching and caring for children.

The Centre's inclusive program, "Sangam" denotes the confluence of all waters to form a single stream. Our programs too are a convergence of children with varying abilities and from varying backgrounds, learning and blossoming together. The Early Intervention Centre - SETU bridges the gap between home and schooling.

While two classrooms are dedicated exclusively to children with special needs, these classes are physically adjoining the regular classrooms. Both sections of the Nursery School are an inclusive set up. Prayer time, play time participation in extra curricular activities, festival celebration, excursions are attended jointly by all children. Thus the

environment facilitates learning through imitation and observation of peers as well as creates better sensitivities to each other. The individualized educational program takes care of those areas where added and special inputs are required.

Integration and Inclusion helps in building sensitivities among the community towards the requirements and rights of these children. It also makes the community aware of its duty in assisting such children to attain their full potential and become a productive member of the community. Here it is imperative to mention that not only the children, but the parents, cab drivers, college students and staff too are exposed to all children. To one recalls the comment of Mr. Prakash Singh, the father of Sara Singh an alumna of the Centre - "I have been personally impacted in developing positive attitudes to special needs children and their challenges. Sabiha Khan m/o Shohum Khan, another alumna recalls how she considered those with various physical and mental challenges as a group who can never do anything. While her son studied in the nursery section, her frequent visits to the Centre as well as interaction with the parents made her aware of the different needs of the special children and she developed positive attitudes towards them.

Under the SETU programme, at-risk children (birth onwards) are assessed by a team of experts and an appropriate programme is provided. The intervention could be in individual sessions, group sessions or inclusive sessions depending upon the readiness and requirement of the child. During sessions counselling empowers parents, caregivers, family members, peers and siblings to overcome the challenges faced while bringing up a child with special needs. The parents are encouraged to follow the programme provided at home as well so as to use their time with the child fruitfully.

As part of the vocational training program, training by our Special Educator is being imparted to young adults with special needs. Assistance in finding placement for such trained personnel is also being provided.

Inclusion of children from economically weaker sections of society who do not have access to quality services is being provided through a sponsorship

programme for children requiring financial assistance.

Parent workshops addressing issues related to children are also conducted in an inclusive manner with parents interacting with each other and sharing their experiences and challenges in providing care to children. Recently, on the occasion of the International Day for Persons with Disability

observed on 3rd Dec each year, Ms.Poonam Natarajan heading the National Trust addressed parents on the functioning and various schemes and programs of the Trust. The audience included sections of parents and there was a very proactive participation from all.



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# Special Needs: Identification and intervention in the Early Childhood Years

Anuradha Naidu

Do you remember the day when you took your first step? Chances are you don't. Early childhood is a blur: our earliest memories only go back to about age 3. When you think about it, growth and development in the early years is a miracle. In the first three years of life, 90 percent of brain development is complete<sup>i</sup>. By six years, we have learnt to walk, talk, feed ourselves, join friends in play, demonstrate curiosity and express emotions.

Everything in nature is programmed to unfold in a pattern. For instance, babies gain control over their bodies in sequence from the neck to the hip and from the core to the extremities. At birth, the infant brain has up to 100 billion neurons<sup>ii</sup>! In the first few days, the number of synaptic connections per neuron is 2,500<sup>iii</sup>. This increases six times by the age of 3.

While pioneering Developmental Psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky proposed theory on child development, contemporary research can today validate their claims with scientific data. Did you know that newborns can recognise happy and sad faces? Or that at birth, babies can see objects and human faces at 8-10 inches distance? The potential for learning before a child turns six is immense.

For an Early Interventionist like myself, these early years of neurological development are fascinating and humbling too. It is the time to actively partner with families to support children whose

development patterns are disordered, disrupted or delayed. In a broader sense, every one of us is an Early Interventionist in a child's life. All it takes are good observation skills and a deep understanding of developmental goals and milestones.

## Birth and the first year

Until recently in Hong Kong, I worked intensely with 0-3-year-olds who were referred through the Government Health Care Service. The patterns of intake showed us that there are three big opportunities for early identification of developmental disabilities in the early childhood years.

Our youngest referrals are only a few days old. Where there are proactive early detection services, severe disabilities due to trauma or genetic disorders can be detected right at birth (or prior to birth), at the hospital itself. One of our students was only 18 days old when we first set eyes on her. Her condition, a rare genetic disorder called Prader-Willi Syndrome<sup>1</sup> (PWS), had been identified at birth at the Government Hospital; the incidence of PWS is one in every 12,000-15,000 people.

Nature always throws up challenges that force us to rethink our ideas of normalcy and development. One such challenge is being able to respond to the needs of children with genetic disorders. Today, there is a wealth of information and parent support networks for children diagnosed with rare genetic

<sup>i</sup>Engaging Families in the Early Childhood Development Story, Page 7, Para5 line9 [http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/ECD\\_Story-Neuroscience\\_and\\_early\\_childhood\\_dev.pdf](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/ECD_Story-Neuroscience_and_early_childhood_dev.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup>Children and Brain Development: What We Know About How Children Learn , Bulletin #4356, Cooperative Extension Publications, The University of Maine , para 2 line 1. <http://umaine.edu/publications/4356e/>

<sup>iii</sup>Children and Brain Development: What We Know About How Children Learn , Bulletin #4356, Cooperative Extension Publications, The University of Maine , para 3 line 2. <http://umaine.edu/publications/4356e/>

<sup>1</sup>Prader- Willi Syndrome: a chromosomal disorder with a prevalence of: 1:12,000- 15,000 (both sexes, all races) The major characteristics are low muscle tone, cognitive impairment, difficult behaviours, and an obsession for eating that leads to morbid obesity. <http://www.pwsausa.org/syndrome/>

disorders like Prader-Willi Syndrome, Cri-du-chat, Rubinstein-Taybi Syndrome, mitochondrial diseases, to name a few that are identified at birth. The initial years present parents with the struggle of handling grief, disappointment and anger. When mothers are unable to get started with stimulation programs at home, they sometimes slide into depression. Yet, I have also known and worked with a mother who opted to have a child with Down Syndrome and embraced him wholeheartedly.

As I have seen both in Hong Kong and in India, in the first year of the lives of such children, medical interventions—surgeries, and visits to feeding clinics—demand urgent attention. Nevertheless, there is a place for Early Intervention too. Recommended activities at this stage to stimulate and monitor the senses and encourage movement and early communication are:

- Encourage playing in different positions: lying on the tummy, sitting, standing, kneeling.
- Use developmentally appropriate toys in play: rattles, balls, blocks, nesting cups, peg rings and push-cars.
- Play games that stimulate the senses: listening to environmental sounds, tracking objects, imitating sounds, imitating actions, for example, clapping, waving, patting etc.
- Encourage pointing, commenting, labelling things, choice-making while reading, storytelling and singing.

### **The second year: Time to talk**

The second opportunity for Early Intervention arises during the second year of life. A child's vocabulary quadruples from the first to the second birthday<sup>iv</sup>. Here is a typical example of a situation when this milestone is delayed. When Josha was 2-1/2 years old, his paediatrician diagnosed him with speech and language delay. From early on, Joshua preferred to play with his cars, obsessively. He had a beautiful smile, but it was difficult for him to look at you and talk. He mostly preferred to remain unnoticed.

Early intervention is, in a sense, a conversation with Nature, which is constantly inviting us to act. In the case of children like Joshua, the learning needs are

complex and connected to a undetected developmental coordination disorder. At this moment, he needs to communicate and share his excitement and we need to follow his lead. Care givers like his are at a loss for ways to support his speech and language development. Unfortunately, there is a resistance to using simple communication strategies such as baby signs and picture communication for fear that speech development may stop. But this fear is unfounded. Opportunities where children like Joshua can make choices of food, toys, books and say 'yes/no' or 'more/finished' actually lower frustration levels and encourage participation. Naturally, children begin to feel secure and reassured - which is a precondition for play, communication and language development.

I used baby signs based on the Makaton signing system<sup>v</sup> for many years. Here are three success stories that are illustrative:

- At age 2-plus, Peter (diagnosed with Down Syndrome) could sign for his favourite music, books and toys.
- At 24 months, Shea (diagnosed with PWS) signs—even before she can stand! As her family and teachers understand her, the tears and frustration are gradually vanishing
- Anthea was diagnosed with speech and language delay, but at age 3, speech has started to come on and, interestingly, her finger-signing communication is disappearing.

Recommendations for stimulating speech and language development at home and in play groups:

- Follow your child's lead, repeat what she is saying, extending the sentences and encouraging imitation. Use favourite play, books, songs and give plenty of choice in daily life.
- Choose a few baby signs to practice each week. Train parents and care givers to make sure that the circle of communication expands. Always use sign communication even as you talk, read and sing.
- Choose three books to read everyday and read the same books for 2-3 weeks. Use toys and

<sup>iv</sup>Baby's brain begins now- Conception to age three <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/why-0-3/baby-and-brain>

<sup>v</sup>Makaton is a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate. It is designed to support spoken language and the signs and symbols are used with speech, in spoken word order. <http://www.makaton.org/aboutMakaton/>

picture cards to match the story. In the absence of books, use familiar stories and picture cards.

- Sing five songs everyday. Drop the words as you sing and encourage your child to finish the lines.
- Play turn-taking games: matching and sorting pictures, drawing pictures together, ball games etc.

### **Kindergarten: 3-6 years**

The third big opportunity for Early Intervention arises upon Kindergarten entry. Kindergarten teachers can help identify and support children who struggle with clumsiness, self-regulation, social anxiety or low motivation. Play and social communication are developmental areas that need special attention to ensure future school inclusion and to build a friendship circle. Drake's story is illustrative of this. Drake sits in silence in his kindergarten class. He usually plays by himself, whereas his peers are beginning to play in pairs. When he is upset, he has a huge outburst and struggles to calm himself down. And while Drake is a fluent reader, he is unable to express himself in simple sentences.

It is a balancing act for the early interventionist to ensure that all areas of a child's development are being addressed. From my experience, working closely with the child's Kindergarten teachers helps create a supportive play and learning environment.

Recommended strategies on creating an inclusive classroom for Kindergarten teachers:

- Avoid labelling a child's behaviour that appears different. Advise parents to consult their paediatrician. Assess your students' likes and dislikes. Children have different types of sensory profiles. Prepare a sensory checklist of classroom material and make note of unusual responses.
- Be patient and reassuring and give children time to respond. Some children need more time to process information.
- Create an inclusive classroom using visual supports, such as visual schedules of the timetable, visual cue cards to prompt good listening and looking during group time, and visual sequence cards that tell children how to carry out tasks step by step.
- Work out your communication strategy for children with speech delays. You can use baby

signs and picture communication and choice boards. Lately, the digital tablet, with its treasure trove of apps, has some great options that support communication. Collaborate with parents and therapists on this.

- For safety and reassurance, have a Help Card with your photograph on the board and a chart with four emotion cards (happy, sad, angry and tired) for children to tell you how they feel.
- For children who crave movement, increase their time in the playground, and include activities like bouncing on the gym ball and walking on a balance beam.
- Fiddle boxes help to soothe children with fidgety fingers. Rubber numbers and alphabets, shapes, and textured toys of a safe size can calm and soothe restless children as do bubbles, play dough and a cuddle.
- Emotionally sensitive children draw comfort from music. A sensitive teacher will ask a mother to drop off her child's favourite CD.
- Identify classmates who can model-play during play time. Talk about how to join in and play, and organise simple turn-taking games in small groups to practice.

### **Conclusion**

The pace and extent of development in the first three years of life is phenomenal. This biological moment presents opportunities to provide young children with special needs with rich environmental stimulation. Everything that we do in the early years will contribute to a child's neurological development and prepare the family to respond to her needs. Follow-up requires fierce determination. Children with genetic disorders or birth trauma can be identified in hospitals. Other types of special needs could show up as developmental milestones unfold. At two years, there is a burst of language vocabulary that must be taken advantage of. Learning baby signs and using picture communication along with rhymes, songs and stories support the development of speech and language—contrary to popular perception that alternative communication will inhibit speech. Kindergarten teachers can support early intervention with regular collaboration with parents and professionals. As I have learnt from my

experience, often the early intervention team becomes a family in a large impersonal

metropolitan city. In this way, a circle of friendship and hope emerges and carries on.



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# Assessment in Early Years Education

Rekha Sharma Sen & Shruti Bhargava



## Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of the education process. For most of us the word 'assessment' conjures images of an examination hall, marks and report card, and the look of dissatisfaction on the face of the elders as our marks often never matched the expectation they had of us. Fear and insecurity would perhaps be the emotions most commonly associated with the word 'assessment'. This picture of assessment is a consequence of a product oriented approach to education which sees education as the means to slot a large number of individuals into a few neat categories – bright, average, dull or intelligent, average, failure. These labels, awarded early, become self-fulfilling and stick with the individual for the rest of her life, influencing her approach to tasks even when she is out of the education system, so to say. Education, instead of being a process of empowerment, divests the individual of self confidence and self esteem. And this process begins right from the early years education in a pre-school.

Among the many things that need to be done in order to make the years of schooling meaningful and pleasurable for the child, a relook at the concept of assessment is necessary - this would involve redefining the purpose of assessment and rethinking the methods used for assessment.

## Purpose of Assessment

Narrowly conceptualized, assessment is a means of finding out what the child has learnt and the progress the child has made from one point of time to another. While this record of the individual child's progress is an important purpose of assessment, this is not the only purpose.

Equally important, the purpose of assessment is to gauge the effectiveness of the teacher's transaction of the curriculum and whether the teaching strategies used have been appropriate. One of the

ways of improving teaching-learning processes in the classroom is to find out how well the children have learnt what they were expected to learn. Such a conceptualization shifts the onus of learning from only the student to both the child and the teacher. Not only should the child learn but the teacher should teach in a way that the child is able to learn. If assessment indicates that a child has not learnt as well as the child should have, then the implication is as much, if not more, for the teacher to introspect about the nature of the teaching and to plan teaching-learning situations in a more suitable way, as it is to locate the reasons within the child.

Even when assessment is being done with the purpose of determining the child's progress, it needs to move beyond merely providing a record of child's performance at a point in time. The assessment results have to be used to support and improve every child's learning and development. They need to be used to individualize the teaching in accordance with each child's needs. Some children may have special needs and requirements which have to be met through use of specialized equipments and teaching strategies. Thus, assessment is not simply a record of performance of a group. The relationship between teaching, learning and assessment is cyclical – they feed into each other. As we teach we need to assess what the child has learnt. The assessment then tells us how we need to adapt our teaching to enhance the child's learning.

The parents are stakeholders in the education of their child. Assessment is a means of communicating to them the progress of their child and to make them partners in their child's learning by encouraging them to supplement the learning in the school at home.

From the perspective of the child, the assessment must generate a feeling of self-worth,

self- confidence and accomplishment in contrast with feelings of fear, tension and incompetence. It must elevate the child in her own eyes and must motivate her to continue in her quest for self-improvement. A young child will not be able to articulate this thought or indeed even be aware of it – however an assessment which empowers is reflected in the daily eagerness of the child to come to school, in the sparkle in her eyes and in the willingness to try out the new and the challenging.

Assessment should be an integral part of every program, benefit children, be used to make appropriate changes in curriculum and instruction, and to evaluate the worth of a program. The purpose of assessment is not to exclude, segregate or retain children.

### **The Nature of Assessment**

Indian education system is dominated by focus on assessment of academic achievement. Such an assessment values only a fragment of the child's total personality. It is not even a holistic assessment of the child's cognitive abilities. At all times, and in early years education specially, assessment must be concerned with the development of the child in all domains – physical, motor, cognitive, language and socio-emotional. How a child responds to another who snatches her toy is as important to note as whether she knows the names of colours. In addition, the assessment must provide a picture of the child's likes, dislikes and interest areas. Such an assessment would be a comprehensive assessment.

Assessment must be planned with the child as the focus and not the teacher. Paper and pencil tests performed within a limited time duration are perhaps convenient for the adults to administer and evaluate but they do not do justice to the child's range of potential. A one-time assessment in a situation often made fearful by the very manner in which it is carried out is unlikely to enable the child to put forth his best. Instead, assessment needs to be spread out over a period of time in order to capture a holistic record of the child's progress, should focus on different dimension of development and the child's personality, and should be individualized to cater to each child's needs, pace and style of learning. Assessment needs to be a continuous process with daily as well as periodic records maintained every 3-4 months.

### **Sources, Methods and Techniques of Assessment**

Since learning is not confined to the hours that the child spends in school, assessment has to be based on information about the child from multiple sources. The teacher is the obvious source of information that immediately comes to mind when we think of assessment, but other than teachers the child's parents, members of his community/ neighbourhood, the child's friends and peers and the child herself can provide valuable information about the child's development and learning. When assessment is done involving all of these people, one gets a holistic picture about the child.

Assessment can be done using one or a combination of the four methods – individual assessment, group assessment, child assessment and peer assessment. In case of the young child, the latter two may not be as feasible. During individual assessment, the teacher focuses on one child doing a task and records the individual child's accomplishments. We are all familiar with this method as assessment since it is most commonly used. During group assessment the teacher records how a group of children work together on a task in order to complete it. This method of assessment is suitable when we want to assess social skills, values and attitudes. During self-assessment the child reports on his own progress while in peer assessment other children provide information about the child's abilities, interest and knowledge.

The most commonly used technique of assessment in schools is paper and pencil tasks and oral tests. These are used even with the very young children. In many nursery schools, children take a written test writing 'A to Z' or '1 to 20'. Oral test may involve recitation of a poem or the alphabet or numbers. This method has many limitations and especially so when used for assessment of young children. The test like atmosphere creates an artificial setting, breeds nervousness in the child which can hamper the child's output. Such an assessment is not child friendly. Especially for assessing the learning and development of the young child this is not the method of choice. Instead, methods such as observing children in their natural setting as they go about their day to day activities and review of daily work done by children in the class or at home such as their drawings and other articles made by children (such as with clay), provide a more

complete information about the child. When such techniques are used for assessing the child, one gets a glimpse of the child's natural development. Teacher observations and portfolio method are less intrusive and more comprehensive as compared to one shot tests. Assessment needs to be valid, encompass the whole child, be continuous over time and use a variety of methods.

### **Observation as a Key Assessment Method**

The most common way of gathering information about children is by watching and listening to them. All teachers observe children they work with. These observations could be informal or intuitive or systematic, planned and focused. There are several ways of observing children which enable collection of authentic and meaningful data.

### **Observation as a method of assessment serves many purposes -**

- Helps teachers identify children's interests which enables the teacher to plan educational experiences which are in line with children's interest and thus may generate more extensive learning.
- Helps to identify the developmental level of each child in each of the domains - Children in a group would be at different developmental levels in differing domains. Observations conducted at different times and in varied settings using different techniques of observation has the potential to give a well-rounded picture of each child's development. This information would help the teacher to individualize instruction and care giving.
- Periodic observations help to keep track of children's progress - A systematic schedule of observations assists in documenting changes in child's or children's behavior.
- Observation is an effective technique for teachers to evaluate their own teaching practices and can provide insights into staff strengths and weakness. This in turn can help plan programs for professional development.
- Observation gives insights into general program as well as specific issues in the class. Written observations on individual children can be added to other information being shared with parents and administrators.

### **How to do Observations in Early Childhood Settings**

When observers enter any environment just their presence may change what might otherwise go on there. Young children fortunately adapt fairly quickly and if it is a known person then they revert back to their typical behavior and ignore the observer. Being unobtrusive is what one should aim for in an observation setting. This is possible if -

- Observation has been planned in advance
- Different observation methods are known and the appropriate method used in a particular situation
- There is clarity about the goals for the observation and the kind of information required
- A schedule has been worked out for whom to observe when
- Equipment such as recorders, stop watches, tape recorder, camera, video camera etc are available.
- The observer locates a position for observing which is unobtrusive. Select a place that allows full view and hearing but does not interfere with what you are trying to observe.

While observing and recording data, be as objective as possible. Suspend judgments, conclusions and other interpretations of meaning until after observation. Focus observation on a specific child behavior, situation, and concerned goal - it is not possible to see everything at once. Record the context of the observation and observe both verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

### **Methods for recording observations of young children**

Observations need to be recorded manually or tape recorded so as not to miss out on information. Just watching children is not enough, there has to be some ways to record what is being seen. It can be difficult to remember and analyze what has been observed and so a variety of methods are needed to document the observations.

- A reflective diary/journal/log - this is a written narrative about a child's/children's development with focus on a particular behavior or all development domains. Such a written record helps to track development over a period of

time. Though it is time consuming, it provides in-depth information. While a diary can be written at anytime and anywhere, it is best to write the observation as soon as the behaviour occurs.

- Audio Recording - In order to assess children's verbal skills, audio records of children's verbal interactions can be made. This method is also useful to record and analyze the verbal interactions between teacher and child or between children.
- Video recording - It is one of the most accurate ways to observe and record interaction in the group or classroom. Though expensive it is a visual and auditory record of what really happened.
- Anecdotal records- An anecdote is a brief account of an important developmental event. Writing an anecdote about children at play or work can be illustrative of their levels of development in many domains. It is useful as it records the behavior in context of a situation but may not give the complete picture of the behavior.
- Rating scales/ checklists – A checklist is a quick and easy way of recording information. A

checklist or a rating scale is a list of skills/ abilities or behaviours that are considered important for observation. When a child shows a particular behaviour it is ticked on the checklist. Raw observational data can be transferred onto checklists. They also lend themselves to comparison of behaviors of several children.

- Portfolios - is as an effective way to collect data on each child. It includes selected samples such as drawings, photos, tape recordings, writing samples, recorded observations by teachers, checklists, rating scales etc. Portfolio gives a comprehensive picture of the child's abilities in many different areas of curriculum.

### **Observation and child's privacy**

Children's right to privacy has to be upheld at all times. In reporting to a parent only their child needs to be discussed. Identity of children and groups of children should similarly be protected in discussions with administrators and school personnel. Names should be omitted from written reports as far as possible.

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# Curiosity and learning

Sharmila Govande nee Mandlik

***‘Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn’.***

Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976)

A toddler was playing in the sandpit for the first time, under the watchful eye of his mother. Her attention shifted as her cellphone rang and the little boy, oblivious of his surroundings, was deeply engrossed in holding sand in his hand. He seemed to be thrilled with the experience of sand slipping out of his fist as he kept repeating the action of picking up sand in his fist over and over again. Gradually curiosity took over and this time he brought his fist to his mouth and was about to get the taste of sand, when his mother pulled him up in her arms and shouted, “No..no eat, sand dirty, you bad boy”. The following few weeks the child was not allowed to play in the sand and was contained in his stroller.

A friend’s daughter about three years of age reached out to the bowl of fruits and pulled out an orange. Within minutes she had crushed the orange in her attempt to peel it. She was engrossed in squeezing the orange and soon the sticky orange juice was all over her dress, hands and the floor. She enjoyed the taste of the juice too. She played with the juice that had spilled on the floor for a while and then started crying out loudly. Apparently, she did not like feeling sticky all over and the flies that she attracted. The mother gently took her to the bathroom, cleaned her up and changed her dress. She was back to playing happily. But this time, she did not go back to the fruit bowl. This friend had let her child live the experience. It would be difficult to point out to what exactly she learnt from the experience, but one could positively say that she did learn the joys of discovery.

By containing the little toddler in his stroller, the mother believed that she was protecting her son from falling sick. The mother was also justified in doing so as eating contaminated sand can lead to

serious illness and could also cause choking. Watching all this silently, I wondered, “What must the child be thinking?”, “What is he learning from all the stimuli he received from the environment and his mother?”, “What would have happened if he had tasted the sand – would he have liked it, or would he have spat it out?”, “Would he have choked?” On the other hand I wondered what would have happened if the little girl had been restrained from exploring the orange? Would I have experienced the joy on her face, the wonder in her eyes, the smacking of her lips after tasting the juice, the displeasure created by the stickiness that the mess created, if her mother had taken the orange away?

Further questions of how would a teacher react to such episodes arose in my mind. Would the teacher stop the child from exploring? Or would she join in the process of exploration? Would she display disgust at the mess created by the child? Would she be worried of their safety?

Jane Clarke, a Kinesiology professor of University of Maryland has talked about ‘containerised kids’. According to her the long term health of children is compromised with more and more children being confined to smaller places. Children spend more and more time in high chairs, strollers, baby seats and car-seats for safety reasons (Louv, 2005). In India too, we witness this in different ways. In urbanised well-to-do families, children are contained in strollers, chairs and seats and in the urbanized poor families they are contained in small dwellings. Children are increasingly unable to explore and experience their surrounding for safety reasons such as accidents, injury, harm from other individuals and creatures. Time constraints and the possible increase in jobs (mainly cleaning the mess created) also deter the mother from giving the child the much needed space to discover their surroundings.

Teachers too contain children in their desks. Children do not enjoy freedom of movement and freedom to explore and experience. Most early childhood education programmes not only limit the space, but also limit the child's experience. A fixed curriculum with fixed methodology and fixed set of activities do not give children the space to be curious and creative. The teachers are constrained not only by the curriculum, but also by the need to 'manage the class' by ensuring a quiet classroom with children sitting at their desks, soaking in all the stimulus given by the teacher with little opportunity to express their responses which could be a display of arising emotion, sharing information they already know or simply asking more questions.

'To learn from experience' is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence (Dewey, 2003). Citing the example of a child sticking a finger into a flame, Dewey states that 'it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence.' The child thus learns from experience that sticking a finger in the flame means a burn and this burn causes pain. The little girl through her experience with the orange experienced the consequence of discomfort and displeasure arising from the stickiness created by the orange juice and hence learnt that squeezing oranges with her hand will cause stickiness. She also experienced the taste of the orange. Soon she will be able to recognize this taste as 'tangy' – a taste different from other eatables.

Piaget gives us insights on how this learning happens. He states that children construct their knowledge and play an active role in the process of learning. They do not passively soak in information given to them, but build from their existing knowledge. According to Piaget, when approached with a new experience, the child first tries to understand it through his existing schemes and structures. Disequilibrium is created when the child feels that his previous understanding does not give a satisfactory answer. This disequilibrium is resolved through the process of accommodation where the child's existing schemes and structures are altered by the new ones. The child adapts, organizes all the structures (new and old) and forms a new understanding. Once the disequilibrium is resolved,

the child achieves a state of equilibrium and this process is called equilibration.

The little girl used her senses of touch, taste, smell and sight to understand what an orange is and what she likes about an orange and what she doesn't. The little boy however was denied this experience. He experienced his mother's unpleasant words and a denial of sandpit entry as a consequence of tasting some sand, the little girl experienced the discomfort created by the sticky orange juice. At the same time she also experienced the pleasure she derived by the sweet taste of the orange. The consequence faced by the little girl was a natural consequence, while the other was created by his mother. This toddler would probably try tasting sand the next time he enters the pit and with similar repeated reactions from his mother would either stop as he did not like this consequence or due to fear.

Would this boy's experience have been different if the mother had approached the problem differently? The way we ask questions or guide children affects their learning experience. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish in their book, 'How to Talk to Kids so That They Learn', bring out the importance of our conversations with our children. According to them, the way we talk to the children shapes their learning. Instead of denying their feelings and their curiosity, one should guide the children to unfold their experience and learn from the resulting consequences. Instead of taking the extreme step of containing the child, the mother could have used a non-threatening way to help the child understand that eating sand is not good. Earlier, Vygotsky too had explained how social interaction helps the child develop his understanding and knowledge. He talks about a process of scaffolding where the adult or an older peer through their interaction help the child build his /her knowledge. His theory on social constructivism states that learning happens through social interaction and the cultural setting of the child.

Both the children were guided by their curiosity to explore and experience. However, while the girl had the freedom to explore her curiosity, the boy's experience was stalled by his mother. Theresa Willingham brought out the deeper impact of thwarting curiosity in the opening statement in a TED conversation<sup>i</sup>, "But without curiosity, there's

little impetus to discover or explore. Without curiosity, apathy and disinterest creep in and the commensurate affects of an unexamined life can be culturally far-reaching - affecting political involvement, scientific, literary, artistic, economic and social achievement and development.”

As early childhood educators, we play a crucial role in keeping this curiosity alive and to provide children opportunities to experience and explore and learn through natural consequences. This is possible if the child uses the five senses of touch, taste, sight, smell

and hearing to process the stimulus and make meaning out of it. Early childhood educators such as Maria Montessori stressed on first the education of the senses and then education of the intellect. She focused on self-realization and believed that the teacher is the keeper of the environment who observes and intervenes from the periphery. In conclusion, as noted by Maria Montessori ‘the task is to arouse such an interest that it engages the child’s whole personality.’(Montessori, 1949).



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[http://www.ted.com/conversations/145/celebrating\\_and\\_inspiring\\_curi.html](http://www.ted.com/conversations/145/celebrating_and_inspiring_curi.html)

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# Creativity: Role of arts in Early Childhood Education

Asha Singh

**“Arts is the very basis of education”**

**Devi Prasad**

Sculptor and Peace Activist

Young children provide a range of dialogues that reflect a deep affinity for making associations, compare and draw their own inferences for making meaning of the world around them. Their dialogues can range from ‘it rains because teacher throws buckets of water up up up’. An irate three-year old having to leave her playschool a bit early complained “Mama why do you come early?” A four year old is exasperated when haphazardly placed cushions are fixed by the mother and howls “you ruined the cave of the lion, the deer will now be caught!” Such childhood narratives convey the vibrancy of children’s thought and processes of thinking. They convey their ability to think in novel ways and make meaning of physical-social reality. Their statements point to fresh perspectives from their experiences and explorations rather than shaped by adult interventions. Children reflect creative minds and multiple visions.


## What is creativity?

Dictionary defines creativity as novel and innovative thinking. Creativity is the process of forming original ideas through exploration and discovery. In the teaching learning process its important to comprehend the notion that creativity develops from experiences with process, rather than concern for the finished product. Creativity is more than talent, skill, or intelligence. Creativity is above competition or doing something better than others, it is about thinking, exploring, discovering, and imagining. How do we foster this active engaging in children such that they can savour the unique possibilities and develop innovative thinking? It is often believed that artists are creative and that excellence in arts is creativity.

While it is true that business houses can be creative in selling products such as the humourous and topical advertisements by Amul. A farmer can be creative in how the planting of saplings form intricate designs, a mother may be house proud and create interesting spaces. Similarly many parents create fabulous stories for their children which amuse and generate bonds of attachment. Yet it is also true that the arts are especially useful in encouraging divergent thought and promoting innovative thinking, yet creativity is an approach, ways of thinking that can energise many chores of everyday rhythms. Experiences to think independently, explore, experiment and experience are essential 3E’s in building strong foundations in young children for moving towards becoming creative adults. Totochan is a book written by a Japanese television anchor who acknowledges her dynamic success to opportunity and experience of adventure as a young child in her school. Freedom to do, freedom to express and above all freedom to make mistakes and be guided to think for alternatives allows skills for problem solving, confidence and independent thought. Creativity is embedded amidst a complex web of simple everyday tasks done as playful experiments.

## Nurturing creativity

Schooling does tend to be led by methods that address a collective with little focus on the individual variations in ability and interests. The genesis of schooling is embedded in print rich knowledge acquisition which does not necessarily provide impetus to the learner who may have visual memory or spatial expertise. Art as the basis for learning unfolds many magical surprises breaking the monolithic tenor of classrooms with methods inclusive of learners with kinesthetic and visual memory.



Arts seem to address a diverse set of learners as they open more communication pathways. Children who are text unfriendly and low on sequential memory lean more towards medium that allows for some unstructured expression. The arts have little set definitions and appreciate both a tree with roots below the soil and as well as trees that have roots that hang. Overtime school systems have to comprehend the full magnitude and positive contribution of arts in education.

Twentieth century Indian philosophers Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sri. Aurobindo have proposed integrated education basing it with primacy on the arts. They emphasized sensitivity in education that nurtures emotion and spirituality through culturally rooted classroom techniques. The arts are languages that most people speak across cultures, languages, geographical locations, variations in educational background and even range of abilities. Music and movement is basic to life rhythms which is why even a distraught baby finds momentary comfort in the rhythm of repetitive sounds. It has been seen through many studies that the arts contribute in the growth and development of children with disabilities. It is also equally important to note that arts also serve as adhesives among communities with diverse skill sets.

In western academic world the “integrated approach resonates in Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences which suggests that our school systems reflect our culture, teach, test, reinforce, and reward primarily two kinds of intelligence - verbal and logical-mathematical. These are often considered as foundations of the basic skills. He suggests, however, that there are at least five other kinds of intelligences that are equally important. They are “languages” with their own symbol systems that most people speak and that reach a wide spectrum of individual differences. They include visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intra-personal intelligences. These intelligences provide the foundations for the visual arts, music, dance, and drama, and through these art forms most students will not only find the means for communication and self-expression, but the tools to construct meaning and learn almost any subject effectively. This is especially true when the arts are not only taught as separate subjects but integrated throughout the curriculum at every level.

The arts comprising music, movement, painting and drama can bring many subjects to life and allow for abstractions to become experienced reality.

Drawings serve as significant insights into children’s thinking. It is important to treat children’s drawings as basis for dialogue. When children create what may appear as collection of curves, lines or squiggles there is a whole set of connections created through the child’s ‘eye’ of the mind. Art in the classroom allows the child to explore and express. The skill to represent with accuracy will follow, the ECE classroom needs to open opportunities for experience not focus on expertise.

Arts as experience can be part of early childhood programmes in three ways. One is the way described as performances during annual events. The other is using arts in everyday classroom interactions. Most teachers are familiar specially in the more progressive settings with organising annual celebrations and attempt to use art in daily rhythms. There is yet another third perspective of meeting the artist who spends a day with the children.

#### **Art in everyday rhythms: playful interactions**

In recent years, ‘child oriented learning’ advocates have generated a discourse around plurality in children’s learning styles. There is a growing awareness of diversity in children’s social, cognitive, and emotional competence as also presence of linguistic variability. As ECE teacher our minds need to be alert to classroom diversity and search for ways in which children can find a personal space within formal learning settings. A simple dolls corner provides vast openings for role play, dialogues that convey feelings and perceptions. Painting with vegetables, arranging leaves collected while on a nature walk is fun and fosters connections between nature, class and learning. Music, storytelling, watching puppet shows and movement involve multiple skills and create multi domain learning. Creativity lies in most activities that form part of the ECE curriculum, it is the playfulness and nurturing the child’s agency and engagement that allows for expression.

#### **Art as annual events: creating connections**

Often annual events are much abused as they create a calendar of haste and rush of schedules. However, each one of us does remember the hustle and bustle

of school celebrations with different memories. Schools are transformed from quiet disciplined spaces to buzzing areas of painting, craft work or rehearsals of dance or music. The school corridors are dotted with children's work of art; annual events have the spotlight on performances. Essentially these performances also mark links with learning embedded in the arts.

Children dressed as mythological characters understand cultural symbols, being in a Naga costume or adorning a Santhali sari become memorable experiences. Dressing up in unfamiliar costumes from different states brings momentary transformation situating children in worlds beyond geographical proximity. It stokes the imagination compelling children to think of diversity of people's lives through sartorial experiences. When children dress as something different or participate in a dance of any kind they think and act as something other than themselves. Art as performance inculcates ability to connect with socio-cultural plurality. Children are able to experience novelty, make associations about possibility of new perspectives.

The music and lyrics unfold cadences and sounds of languages. Experience of the art forms through movement or creating sets sensitizes to colours or hues significant in various social geographies besides also kindling a sense of curiosity for related stories, customs and traditions.

### **Art through the masters**

Some schools have other ways of creating opportunities for arts in the life of children at school. They attempt camps with professionals, working with celebrity artistes as experiences beyond encounters with glamour only bringing forth awe for expertise and skill. Certain schools have attempted such measures to the delight of children.

Spic Macay is a step in this direction as well. Permitting art activities to be centre stage has many hidden treasures such as being

- Inspirational
- Fostering value for multiple talents
- Creating regard for varied professions (playing musical instruments, potter, mathematician - all share the same stage)
- Understanding the role of practice for perfection

- Opening opportunities for children with different talents to communicate and express

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey wrote of this unique ability of the arts to "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness." Artists, he felt, "have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation". When we begin to create and respond to the arts ourselves, we kindle the fires of emotion, perception and appreciation. We look underneath the surface realities of the world. We release our imagination.

### **Why are the Arts important?**

1. They are languages that all people speak that cut across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers and enhance cultural appreciation and awareness.
2. They are symbol systems as important as letters and numbers.
3. They integrate mind, body and spirit.
4. They provide opportunities for self expression, bringing the inner world into the outer world of concrete reality.
5. They offer the avenue to "flow states" and peak experiences.
6. They create a seamless connection between motivation, instruction, assessment, and practical application leading to deep understanding.
7. They are an opportunity to experience processes from beginning to end.
8. They develop both independence and collaboration.
9. They provide immediate feedback and opportunities for reflection.
10. They make it possible to use personal strengths in meaningful ways and to bridge into understanding sometimes difficult abstractions through these strengths.
11. They merge the learning of process and content.
12. They improve academic achievement enhancing test scores, attitudes, social skills, critical and creative thinking.
13. They exercise and develop higher order thinking skills including analysis, synthesis, evaluation and "problem-finding."

14. They are essential components of any alternative assessment program.
15. They provide the means for every student to learn.

#### Conclusions and simple classroom strategies:

In our schools we have some minimal provisions for the arts in place, however it would be movement towards creativity and education for Human Development if more thought went in making varied choices taking into account the diversity of students. Children with disability also tend to get an optimal environment in the expression friendly and non-singular format of the arts. Schools need to focus on being

- being more inclusive of plural forms: variety rather than one singular typing of responses
- explore best practices from different school settings: music for the day
- Regional days: use museum of drums, masks, costumes
- Regional arts & celebrations : linkages with different artistes
- Link with artistes for children-oriented projects



#### Ideas for Classroom dynamics

- Read stories, laugh together, encourage children to enact characters, use voice modulations
- Join in the tea parties in the housekeeping or doll corner during imaginative play.
- Modify the housekeeping/dress-up corner into the home with different number of children or make it for story characters of the three bears. Transform that same housekeeping corner into a rocket, ship or a doctor's clinic.
- Play with children to build towers and bridges with wooden blocks. Add little leaves or old cardboard boxes to create different landscapes.
- Invite puppets to talk with children and help them learn new songs and finger plays.
- Change the classroom furniture arrangement to encourage spaces with new purposes and functions.
- Use the floor instead of the usual table for eating together or listening to stories.
- Have small corners for children to spend time reading or doing a puzzle.
- Use common everyday objects for new uses. For example, paint with a rubber ball dipped in paint, change a book into a talking puppet, or turn a table over and make it a boat.



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# Prenatal English? Why Not? Mother Tongue vs. English in Early Education

Ajit Mohanty


When Pinky, a Saora tribal girl from Tumulo village in Gajapati district of Odisha, was born, her parents were happy. “Our Pinky will go to school”, said the father. Pinky’s mother was pleased to hear this. “That will be really good. We were not that fortunate. Pinky will be educated”, she said. Pinky grew up, started walking and, before long, held her father’s fingers to go to the village market. Amid all her playful time, she would smile and utter a few words – not quite clear but everyone around seemed happy with her baby talk. Soon she uttered broken sentences in Saora language to speak to her parents, villagers and other children. She addressed her parents in Saora, named the plants and trees, flowers and fruits and animals around in her village. Taking a ride on her father’s shoulder, she would gleefully count, along with her father, all the butterflies she saw on her way to Bagada<sup>1</sup>. The villagers were impressed with Pinky; “She is a clever girl!” they said. One day the village teacher said, “She is six-year old already. Send her to school.” Pinky’s parents were very happy taking her to school for her admission. Pinky was also happy. She got new books and notebooks from her school and proudly showed them to her mother, who said, “Your teacher will teach you how to read these books. I never learnt to read.”

Pinky went to school every day. But, gradually she became quieter. “What did you do in the school?” asked her mother. Pinky did not say anything. Her father said, “Has your teacher taught you to read this book? Read me a story.” Pinky remained silent. Gradually she became more and more silent and apathetic. She became irregular in school. One day the teacher confronted Pinky’s father in the village market, “Pinky is not coming to school regularly. And whenever I ask her any question, she bows her head down and remains silent.” The father was not happy hearing this. “Why don’t you go to school? You don’t

answer teacher, why?” he asked Pinki. “I don’t understand what the teacher says. I only see the pictures in the book, but, I cannot understand whatever the teacher reads from the book”. Her father understood. The teachers in the school speak in Odia which Pinki does not understand. He remembered his own childhood; he also left school for the same difficulty with the language of his school; it was not Saora. Before long, Pinki also stopped going to school.

Pinki and her father are not alone. Millions of children are pushed out of schools which impose a language on children ignoring the language in which they have learnt to speak, address their parents, and know plants, flowers, fruits, animals, ecology and members of their family and community. A child’s early language is the language of her first identity, all her early experience and learning, her relationship with her friends and elders, her understanding and strivings to find solutions. This language is adequate for her home, family, community and village and it empowers her to deal effectively with her social world. But, as she enters school, everything changes. The school opens its doors for her but there is an invisible and formidable boundary between her and the classroom. Suddenly her own language becomes useless and belittled by a dominant school language. All her understanding, her experience and her resources are suddenly devalued. Her language is no longer her asset; it becomes a liability. The language of the school is unfamiliar and it has no relation with her childhood, her experience, her social construction and her knowledge. How does she cope with the burden of a language that undermines her identity and distantiates her from her own experience? It comes as no surprise that many children are pushed out of school under the burden of an unfamiliar language.

<sup>1</sup>Bagada is a special cultivation site for the tribal people in Odisha.



It is, of course, true that in today's world, particularly in a multilingual country like ours, one language is not enough; school learning must involve multiple languages – mother tongue, the language of the region such as Tamil, Punjabi or Bengali, national level languages like Hindi and international language like English. But, why should children learn in their school a language that they already know? Why not go for an early start in another major language? The mother tongue is needed since the foundational knowledge for effective school learning of children is encoded in that language of their comprehension and expression. This language makes them school ready and, at the same time, they also need to take their language skills further. Even if children may appear to be competent in their early language, it is primarily used for social and interpersonal communication embedded in the immediate situation of home and community. School learning, on the other hand, involves complex and abstract concepts and use of language to master these concepts, to solve problems, to regulate one's own thinking and to think about language (as the object of thought). Schooling and early literacy instruction enable children to go beyond social and contextual use of language to the higher levels of use for regulated thinking, cognition and academic learning. Children's early language must develop to this cognitive and academic level with competence in thinking about language for scholastic achievement as well as for learning other languages.

On their entry to school, children from linguistic minority and tribal communities are burdened with a dominant school language with which they have little or no familiarity. Besides the burden of non-comprehension and resultant school failure, the school language fails to advance these children's language skills beyond the simple interpersonal communication and it has negative or subtractive effects on their mother tongue; as they learn the dominant language their mother tongue skills decline. While development of basic interpersonal communication skills in a language takes two to three years, the cognitive and academic language skills develop more slowly taking about six to eight years. Thus, mother tongue must be used as the language of early education and formal schooling for at least six years so that children develop the ability to use language for higher levels of thinking,

problem solving and multilingual proficiency besides ensuring scholastic success. In fact, early learning in the mother tongue happens at no cost to later learning of other languages; while children can develop conversational and social communicative competence in many languages early in their development, they acquire higher level literacy and academic skills in other languages much faster when their mother tongue skills are well developed beyond the early social use. This is the fundamental principle of mother tongue based multilingual education.

Children join school not as a clean slate, but as rich repository of knowledge; their language, experience and understanding are the resources for further development of language and literacy, mathematical concepts, environmental awareness in primary schools. Moving from early childhood and informal cultural experience to formal schooling is a major challenge for each child. The distance from home to school is not just physical; it is a psychological distance of cognitive, conative, and social readiness for school learning. Hence, prior to joining schools, between 2 to 6, children need a psychological, physical, social and intellectual preparedness to benefit from formal schooling. Early childhood education is for development of such readiness, in which language plays a significant role. Early childhood education bridges the development of children's language from social communication skills to use of language for thinking and effective classroom learning. On the 20th September, 2013, the Union Cabinet approved the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy which mandates education in child's mother tongue as a necessary preparation for school education for complete development and equal opportunities for quality education. Out of nearly 160 million children under six, 45 million are in private early childhood education programmes for which their parents have the means to pay. Nearly 75 million children are in the ECCE programmes (such as Anganwadis) of the Integrated Child Development Scheme of the Government. There is no ECCE opportunity for the remaining 40 million children. Thus, there is an unjust discrimination in the scope for development of human resources and potentials during the early childhood years. Hopefully, the draft policy, prescribing minimum ECCE standards, can

effectively deal with such discrimination. Section 5.2.4 of the draft policy says that “the mother tongue or home language of the child will be the primary language of interaction in the ECCE programmes”. The draft policy also suggests that given the young child’s ability at this age to learn many languages, exposure to the national/ regional language and English in oral form as required, will also be explored. Thus, the ECCE policy accepts the critical role of mother tongue for regulation of child’s thinking and reasoning skills and for cognitive and scholastic development and, at the same time, recognizes the robust research findings that multilingual children are more intelligent and creative compared to their monolingual counterparts. The problem is not with the development of multilingualism; it is with early education in a non-mother tongue language.

Parents, unfortunately, are impatient – eager to bring in English too early. English appears to be the language of power, progress and economic opportunities and, hence, the obsession to bring English as early as possible in homes as well as in early-childhood and school education. Such is the craving for English to the very young and immature children that if someone offers prenatal English education for babies still in their mothers’ womb, like the puranic Abhimanyu learning tricks of warfare, there will be long queues of takers. This current craze for English is irrational and unsupported by what is well known in educational principles – mother tongue is the royal road to quality education and effective learning of many languages including English. The modern Abhimanyus do not need English so early; they need good care, culture and mother tongue based quality education.



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# Language and Literacy Learning in Early Years: What Should It Look Like?

**Shailaja Menon**

Raju<sup>1</sup>, a 6 year old boy, looks intensely at a picture of an elephant shown to him by his teacher.

“What is this picture?”, asks the teacher in Kannada.

“Aane” (elephant), responds Raju, a native speaker of Kannada.

The teacher looks puzzled for a minute when she realizes that he is right; but the word “aane” doesn’t fit into the sequence of letters she is supposed to be teaching!

“Yes, you’re right”, she says, “but there is another word for it – Salaga (tusker). What is the word?”

Raju does not respond.

“Salaga”, emphasizes the teacher, making Raju repeat it after her, before moving on to the next picture. After going over three more pictures, the teacher returns to the first card.

“What is this?”, she asks.

“Aane” (elephant), says Raju.

“Yes, correct, but remember I taught you another word – Salaga – for it? Say Salaga.”

Raju repeats obediently.

Three more picture cards later, Raju sticks to “aane” when prompted.

The teacher is getting increasingly impatient.

In the final round of questioning, Raju responds to the picture card with, “I don’t know.”

Vignette drawn from field work done on the LiRIL project, Feb 2013<sup>2</sup>

This example is drawn from the transcript of an interaction documented on the Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL) project<sup>3</sup> currently being conducted in Yadgir (Yadgir District), Karnataka, and Sonale (Thane District), Maharashtra. It raises important and interesting questions about early language learning that warrant greater attention from practitioners and scholars alike.



## What Do We Know About Early Language and Literacy Learning?

Many children in Indian classrooms, like Raju, are first-generation learners, or come from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts. Such children may have had very limited exposure to print prior to school, and may not have models at home or in their communities who use it effectively in their own lives. Their vocabulary and other oral skills may also be somewhat limited as compared to peers from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

In any early language learning context, but especially in ones that cater to more disadvantaged populations, one of the key tasks of teachers in the early grades is to reinforce and extend the oral language(s) that children bring to school from their

<sup>1</sup>The name been changed to protect identity of the student.

<sup>2</sup>This vignette is drawn from the work of BinduThirumalai, who completed an internship on the LiRIL project from Feb-April 2013.

<sup>3</sup>This is a longitudinal project that is funded jointly by Sir Ratan Tata Trust and AzimPremji University; and includes field partner organizations, QUEST (Sonale, Maharashtra) and Kalike (Yadgir, Karnataka). The detailed field observations conducted by Research Associate, Neela Apte, are foundational to this paper.

homes and communities; and to help build their understanding of the written system of texts. Table 1 summarizes three central tasks that young

language and literacy learners are engaged in, and principles that could help them accomplish these

**Table 1**  
**Principles of Language Learning**

What is the child doing?	Programme built on ECCE principles should:
Transitioning from home to school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build curricular and pedagogical bridges from home to school.</li> <li>● Set larger goals of language and literacy learning; establish it as meaningful and purposeful.</li> </ul>
Developing oral language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide rich opportunities for extending oral language learning, vocabulary acquisition and meaning making.</li> <li>● Use language that moves from the known to the new.</li> </ul>
Acquiring familiarity with written language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduce children to relationships (similarities and differences) between oral and written language.</li> <li>● Establish meaningful contexts for the use of written language.</li> <li>● Introduce sound-symbol relationships.</li> </ul>

*Principle 1: Enable Successful Home-School Transitions*

The first principle suggests that young learners are engaged in making a home-school transition during their early years of schooling; this is a significant transition, and is often not an easy one for learners to make. Scholars who have researched early literacy learning in diverse sociocultural contexts have noticed that the language of the school is more similar to the language of the home for middle-class populations, than it is for children from more socioeconomically disadvantaged sections of society (e.g., Heath, 1982; Purcell-Gates, 1997). In multilingual societies like India, children are oftentimes asked to cross barriers of language and dialect in going to school. Even when the home and school languages are the same, children may face challenges with the vocabulary and discourses used in school (as in the case of Raju, a native speaker of Kannada attending a Kannada-medium school). Paulo Friere, the famed Brazilian educator, believed that reading the word is connected to reading the

world; people’s worlds and words must be included in the curriculum for true learning and empowerment to be possible (Freire & Macdeo, 1987).

If we go back to the vignette at the beginning of this paper, we notice that the child began by thinking that he knew what the picture was, but he ended by saying, “I don’t know.” That poignant “I don’t know” hints of the possibility of many such interactions past and future, interactions that could lead to a growing alienation from the world of school and texts. This vignette, it must be noted, is but one of several documented instances on our project of the child’s words being replaced by more formalistic, unfamiliar curricular words. Why, we may ask, should a six year old child remain interested and invested in a schooling that consistently replaces his words with their own, moves him from a place of “know” to a place of “I don’t know”?

*Principle 2: Develop and extend oral language*

All school-based learning is built on strong oral

language skills. Without proficiency in the oral language used at school, a child will struggle with vocabulary and understanding the meaning. It is critical for developing comprehension and also for developing facility with writing. Even for children whose home language is the same as the language of the school, planned and sustained opportunities for extending oral language are important. This does not happen by simply replacing the child's (known) vocabulary with unknown (more formal) words. Oral language development happens through a variety of ways that include opportunities for extended conversations, discussions, storytelling, book reading, and opportunities to write, and so on. Talk has often been referred to as the "tool of tools" in developing oral language and comprehension. Early language learning environments, therefore, need to be places where rich oral language is modeled, practiced and reinforced consistently.

On the LiRIL project, we have noticed that opportunities for developing oral language are not many, or systematically planned in the curriculum, in the early language classrooms that we have observed. Where it is included, it has appeared as the recitation of a group song each day (e.g., in Yadgir), or as unplanned "fillers" between activities (e.g., in Sonale). Neither of the sites we are working in uses read-alouds of children's literature or shared experiences to facilitate rich discussions. Instead, the focus at both sites, appears to be on developing proficiency with mastering the script.


*Principle 3: Help learners to acquire familiarity with written language*

It is true that young language and literacy learners need systematic opportunities to acquire proficiency with mastering the script. Since this is the focus of the curriculum in many of the early grades we have worked in, we may ask, are children developing proficiency with the script? Our data indicate otherwise - 33% of third-graders in Yadgir, and nearly 28% of third-graders in Sonale were unable to proficiently read a word-list consisting of simple two-akshara words. Even larger numbers of third-graders were unable to decode a short passage consisting of very simple, familiar words. Why is this so?

The reasons for this failure are complex. Without being overly simplistic in our analysis of the issues, it appears that one of the reasons could be that when

the written language is broken down into sets of abstract symbols that have no reference to meaning, and are presented to the child day after day for copy-writing and memorization, the child's motivation to learn these symbols is at an all-time low. Jim Gee (2003) has noted that children from poverty stricken, inner-city homes in the US, who fail year after year to acquire the 26 letters of the English alphabet, appear to have no problem with acquiring a far more extensive and complex set of abstract symbols related to Pokemon cards and games that were popular in the US at that time. Motivation to learn appears to be key to success. Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963/1986) exploited this principle in her organic approach to teaching reading to children from the Maori tribes of New Zealand. She asked children to select words that are important to them. No words were taboo, words for fear, lust, despair, were all welcome in her classroom. In her seminal book, *Teacher*, she writes of how children instantaneously learnt words that belonged organically to them.

Compare this to the prevalent situation in many parts of our country, where the alphabet is taught in sequence, ordered according to one kind of logic (traditional varnmala) or another (more experimental versions of grouping letters together). Many of these systems, for example, the ones we have observed and documented closely in Yadgir, exclude the introduction of matras (gunitas) - the secondary signs used to represent vowel sounds in Indian languages - until well into the first grade. As a result, first generation learners come to school to be exposed to a language devoid of most vowel sounds for the first four-five months of schooling. What kind of words and thoughts can be expressed without vowels? Potentially the most naturally important words to a six year old - me, mother, food, home, friends, tree, school, brother, sister, father, cow, dog - are eliminated from the curriculum because each of these contains either matras or jodakshars (vattakshara), the conjunct consonant sounds (e.g., the /mm/ sound in "amma"). It is for this reason that the child is not permitted to say, "anne", because this word contains one vattakshara(/nn/), and one gunita (/e/). Salaga (tusker) is selected only because it conforms to the permitted combination of aksharas currently being taught.



This is a gross misunderstanding of what it means to help young language learners to acquire familiarity with the written language. Written language should be introduced in a manner that is continuous with, and not divorced from, oral speech. Similarities and dissimilarities between how oral and written language work can be pointed out to young children – e.g., we often talk in phrases, but we write in complete sentences. The formality of our language also shifts – these can be pointed out explicitly and discussed with children during read-alouds, shared writing opportunities, and more. Marie Clay, in the 1970s, has pointed out the importance of teaching young language learners “concepts of print”, such as, how the book is held, which direction the script is read in, the idea that print carries messages (young children tend to attend mostly to the pictures), and so on (Clay, 2000).

The script itself must be introduced and practiced systematically – but, ideally, this should take up only a certain percentage of the total time spent on language instruction in the classroom and should not be the mainstay of the early language and

literacy curriculum. In our research, we have documented that lower-order decoding and copy writing takes up between 73-81% of the total time spent on language instruction in first and second grade classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to briefly sketch three important tasks that young language learners engage in as they transition from home to school, and have identified certain pedagogical principles for helping children succeed in these tasks. The principles are illustrative, and are by no means exhaustive of what might constitute good language and literacy pedagogy. I have also tried to describe a few insights from our research project to exemplify the issues on the ground. While the issues are complex and need far more time, thought and research devoted to understanding them fully, a safe take-away from this piece would be that connecting the curriculum to the learner, and the learner to the curriculum, is central and critical to early language learning.

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# Teaching Early Reading Skills

Rhea Bazeley

## Introduction

There are studies available and many books published dealing with the process of learning to read. However some of the language used often means that such knowledge is only accessible to specialist early years professionals, when in fact many individuals are involved in preparing children to be successful readers, whether they know it or not.

At one point during my teaching career I was in charge of the Early Years of education in my school and was teaching the Reception / Year 1 class. At this time I was also Deputy to a Head Teacher who had no experience of teaching very young children. Soon after we began working together, I remember him asking me, 'How do children learn to read?' I did manage to explain it to him, and at the end of it all, he said, 'I think it would be really useful if the parents could hear this.'

As a result we began to hold an annual 'Reading Meeting' specifically for the parents of children who had just started school for the first time. As the years progressed the content of my presentation at the meeting changed slightly. Parents who wanted to attend were not just the ones who had children in the new Reception class, but parents of children further up the school too. The feedback we had was extremely positive. Many parents came to the meeting year after year. They felt it was interesting, easy to understand and inspirational because they were given clear ideas of what they could do to help their children begin to read, and support them once they became independent readers.

The following advice for developing reading skills from birth to independent reading is a compilation of the content of my Reading Meetings referred to above. I hope it is written in such a way that anyone who is trying to help children prepare for reading, such as parents, family members, nursery staff,

teaching assistants as well as teachers will find it easy to understand, logical and useful.

## ***Promoting Skills Needed for Reading (Pre-Reading Skills)***

### **Early language skills**

When a child is born it needs love, nourishment and a sense that it is cherished and safe. Those involved in caring for babies and very young children strive to provide all these things, however difficult their circumstances and where ever they are in the world.

Families who talk gently and kindly to their babies, use eye contact and happy expressions are teaching babies that communication is a pleasurable and useful means of interacting with the world around them.

These are the first vital things a child needs to learn in order to connect with loved ones. Without the ability to communicate using appropriate language, reading would be impossible and meaningless.

In early childhood, songs, rhymes and chants are all useful in building skills for reading. The nature of traditional nursery rhymes is a vehicle for young children to hear similar sounds and to memorise rhymes, building up auditory skills which will help with phonic learning in the future. In my experience children who come to school knowing nursery rhymes often learn to read more quickly than those who are unfamiliar with them.



Play is another vital part of early childhood. Play is one of the ways children are able to interact with each other and engage in role-play. The language which develops in these situations builds experience of conversation.

All young children love colourful pictures. There is little as rewarding for an adult as sitting with a young child who is transfixed by a picture. Even before a child can speak, an adult will be able to talk about the details of a picture and the child will be able to follow, often trying to repeat words and point to parts of the picture. Interpretation of pictures plays a key role in early reading clues.

When children are still very young, stories are an essential component of pre-reading experiences. Children who experience books within the family learn how pictures and text together in a book tell a story. They learn how to concentrate and listen because stories are fun, and children love fun! They learn prediction skills and experience sequencing and repetition.

Occasionally I had a challenging group of reception pupils. This happened when some of the children came to school not knowing about stories or how to listen. I found that to tell a story without a book, or just using pictures enabled me to keep eye contact with the children. Lots of expression, funny faces and even songs maintain their interest which helped build up concentration skills.

### **The importance of FUN**

All pre-reading activities need to be fun for children. Enjoyment related to all the oral and practical experiences we help facilitate for children will give positive re-enforcement to the acquisition of reading skills.

Children generally laugh easily and naturally, and if they do so while they are engaged in any pre-reading activities, we should be delighted. I have always said that the more fun you can generate, the better the learning!

### **Being aware of developmental issues**

As any parent or teacher knows children develop at different rates both emotionally and physically.

In my experience the only generalisation possible would be that little girls tend to be ready to read at a younger age than little boys. However, there are always exceptions.

The emotional and physical developmental differences between the genders can vary by about 6 months or more.

A note of caution must be included here. A child who is pushed into a formal reading situation before he is ready, will not experience the joys of success. There is a real danger he will associate failure and frustration with learning this vital skill.

Pre-reading activities should continue for some children longer than for others. The benefits in the long term are likely to be huge.

I quote here an example of one of my pupils:

He came into my reception class as a very young (only just 4 years old), very small, immature, sweet natured little boy. He loved to play with the construction kits, dress up and engage in role play in the play house. All his learning during the whole of his first year in school was pre-reading based. During that first year he was happy and gained confidence. When he returned to school for his next year, he was ready for reading and made a very good start almost straight away. He was a good, average confident pupil with an excellent attitude to work by the time he left primary education. He took one of the leading roles in a large drama production we produced in his last year with us. He also did well in high school and went on to a very prestigious college. I often wonder if things would have turned out differently for him if he had been rushed into formal reading a year earlier.

### **Physical Development**

Physical development is associated with hand / eye coordination and must be an integral part of early year's education. Without good hand eye coordination a child will not be able to write successfully. Early writing activities can be used to reinforce phonic learning and spelling.



All young children love physical activity and are constantly setting themselves physical challenges. When very young they can be observed extending their own abilities by trying out and perfecting physical skills, for example: rolling over and over; throwing things to see how far they go. Many of these activities are to be observed quite naturally in children's free play.

When children enter a school environment, they still need to be able to play for a considerable portion of their day in order to continue developing their physical skills. More structured physical learning is evident when they begin to enjoy physical group activities with their peers. Much of this continues to be evident in play, for example: balancing along a beam or branch, all ball games, clapping games with rhymes, dancing of all kinds, skipping, swimming and riding a cycle or a scooter.

### **Construction activities**

In order for children to learn to read successfully it is important that they have developed the ability to visualise and to recall shapes. Words are really only patterns on a page, most of which can be decoded by knowing the phonic meaning of all the components. However, there are also many words which can not be decoded in this way and the 'shape' of the word has to be learned.

For young children the ability to visualise shapes in 2 and 3 dimensions is greatly enhanced by the opportunity to create shapes and patterns using various construction techniques. Simple wooden building blocks are often a favourite and can be transformed into a range of amazing structures with the help of a child! They can become a train, a bridge, a fort, a palace, a tractor, a car, a house, a bed --- the list is endless. In each transformation the child is recalling the shapes to be constructed and putting the blocks into what he/she considers a similar shape. All these effort should be valued and encouraged.

### **Pattern making**

Individual letters are patterns on a page, words are patterns made up of other patterns!

Children need experience of pattern making before they are asked to interpret the complex 'patterns' of the written word.

Young children love the order of patterns. A practical way of introducing the concept of pattern

to a group of young children is to arrange them into a simple line of boy, girl, boy, girl, boy, girl etc. Young children will find this exciting because they can predict what should come next when they begin to understand patterns.

There are numerous wonderful activities which can be done through the theme of pattern. 3D objects such as sticks and leaves are usually readily available and can be put to good use for pattern making. A simple pattern (one leaf – one stick –one leaf etc) can develop into more complex arrangements such as 2 leaves, 3 sticks 2 leaves, 3 sticks etc. Beads for threading, blocks for piling up, in fact anything can be used to introduce pattern play.


After playing with 3D objects to make various patterns, children are usually ready to move onto 2D pattern making. Printing with vegetable shapes onto paper, is a popular and exciting activity for young children. I used to cut out various assorted different coloured paper into 'tree' shapes. Each child had a shape. They would invent a pattern for their tree and print the pattern using different vegetable shapes and colours. When all were completed I would mount them on a large wall and we would have a 'forest' of patterns.

The fun of practical activities such as these builds skills in prediction and sequencing.

### **The use of pictures – Matching and sequencing**

Matching picture games such as 'Lotto' are fun and valuable for young children. It builds their visual skills in recognising similarities which is essential for reading. Children will need to have the ability to recognise words which are the same so that they do not always have to go through the process of decoding a word each time they meet it. Practicing this skill with pictures is enjoyable and meaningful for a young child.





Jig-saws are also valuable in building visual discrimination skills. Children who learn to do jig-saws successfully build up visual learning skills and because of this will be able to discriminate between all the phonic symbols and blends required for reading.

The next stage on would be to present a series of pictures – perhaps 3 different pictures to begin with, and build up to about 5 or 6. Children can use the pictures to tell a story, either individually or in a group. This will build up the ability to sequence events, another vital skill if a child is to enjoy and understand stories through independent reading.

Pictures are an essential part of early reading activities. Children enjoy all kinds of pictures. One picture can tell a whole story. The language associated with such a picture is the language of books, and if children are able to participate in this kind of story-telling they are being well prepared for the world of reading.

Children will often embark on ‘play’ reading from a very early age. This takes many forms, but frequently involves a child sitting with a book, turning the pages and ‘telling’ the story with appropriate intonation as they have seen modelled by adults. Sometimes, as children are becoming ready to read, they will often independently scan the text in a book for sounds or words which are familiar to them. They show great excitement when they find some symbols they recognise. This is one of the signs that a child may be ready to begin formal reading activities.

### **Avoiding failure**

I can not stress enough that all these pre-reading activities should be fun for children. It is vitally important that learning is pleasurable and that children are motivated. Adults should have the role of facilitators building up their expectations of children gradually. A copious amount of praise for all efforts, even the less successful ones, should be the order of the day. I have found, over the years, that there is always something positive one can say in the way of encouragement. Human beings, however young or old, thrive on praise!

### ***Beginning Formal Reading Activities***

#### **Developing Phonic Knowledge**

Children need to know the relationship between the symbols of the alphabet and the sounds they make.

This can be started quite early but must be approached using informal, multi-sensory, practical activities. There are many ways of incorporating fun into early phonic learning. A number of good schemes and programmes are available to help educators achieve success. The best ones involve visual clues, an auditory element, and some sort of activity which tie all these together. Merely showing young children the letters of the alphabet, telling them the related sounds and expecting them to remember them all, may work for some children, but many will need more clues than this to make a successful early start to reading.

During my teaching career I have seen a number of different methods used to introduce early phonics. Some have been more successful than others.

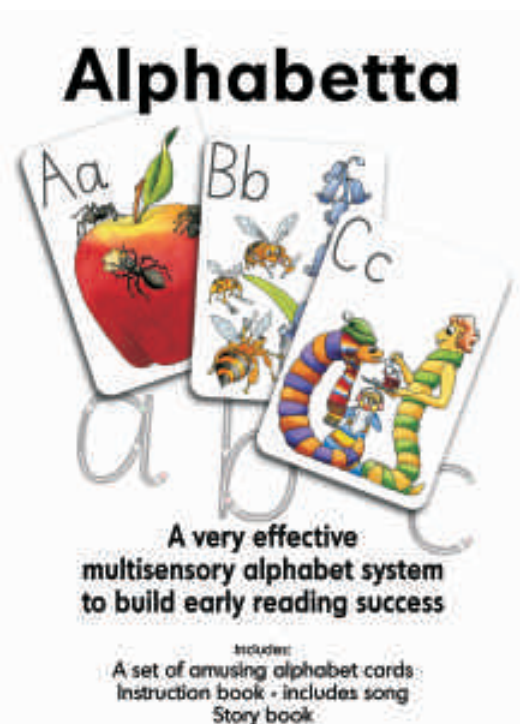
I myself developed a simple song with a verse for each letter – extremely simple and repetitive – with associated amusing illustrations, which I used very successfully for many years. What made my simple system different at the time was that as children finished singing each verse of the song, they would be encouraged to trace the correct shape of the letter in the air. This helped in a number of ways:

- It helped children to visualise what the letter looked like.
- It added a kinaesthetic (touch) element to the learning of phonic connections.
- It allowed children to practice the formation of letters without having to risk making incorrect marks on paper before they have developed the ability to control a pencil effectively.
- In becoming familiar with the way letters are formed at the same time as learning the sounds they make, children are able to make connections and consolidate their learning because visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities were involved throughout.
- Knowing the correct way to form all the letters of the alphabet from an early stage has huge benefits not only for handwriting, but also for the future learning of spelling.

I am now retired from teaching but continue to be passionate about the importance of learning to read. My daughter lives in a remote part of Ireland and has 4 children. When the youngest two were approaching school age she and her husband decided that they would home educate all 4

children. She grew up knowing my 'Alphabet Song' and taking it for granted. When she started using it with her own children in their home education programme she realised how effective it is, and encouraged me to publish it. I have taken her advice and hope that it may be of use to families who seek to help their children at home and indeed other educators of young children in a variety of settings ( [www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk](http://www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk) ). The illustrations have been re-worked by my husband who is an artist with a very active sense of humour! I have written a story which weaves through the letters of the alphabet and is linked to the pictures and the song. There is also an audio CD included in the pack which contains the whole story and the song.

'Our 'Alphabetta' system can be used with very young children who enjoy the individual pictures and the related simple verse of the song. It can also be used with older children who enjoy picking out more phonic links in the text of the story. My own Grandchildren still delight in inventing more of their own funny verses for the song, which are often very amusing indeed!



### Letter formation as an aid to learning

As children are introduced to the phonic sounds of each letter, in whatever way is chosen, a very useful way of re-enforcing learning is to teach the

formation of the letter at the same time as the sound it makes, as explained in the paragraph above. It is important to focus on lower case letter formation in the early stages. Capital letters are likely to be familiar, because they are used in signs, on packaging and are also on computer key-boards. Upper case letters are easy to form because there are many straight lines in their construction. However, the bulk of any text is made up of lower case letters. Although traditional handwriting is not used as much in the modern world as it used to be, it is still important for children to know how lower case letters are formed.

For a young child the skill of writing is a much more complex process to learn than the skill of reading. Reading involves decoding marks on a page, whereas writing involves beginning with a blank page, and making the marks which should be correct, in order for them to be deciphered. For this reason, when a young child begins to learn to read, it is important that the focus should be on reading, and not to expect progress to be made in writing at the same time. However, correct letter formation can be introduced in a very practical way so that it is an aid to early reading activities.

Just keep in mind that without the ability to read, the skill of writing is meaningless.

### Whole word recognition

When children can recognise all the sounds required to decode simple words and are able to blend these sounds together, they can usually begin to read simple text in books.

There are many words which can not be decoded by blending the component sounds, so it is also important to show the children that it is possible to recognise whole words by their shapes. I have found that a good way to begin building this skill is to provide cards upon which are printed colour words, in the correct colour. (e.g. red, blue, green yellow etc.) A number of activities can be devised which require children to match the word on the card in order to complete a task. The children have the clue they need initially in the colour of the word. Soon the coloured word cards can be replaced by standard word cards on which all text is printed in black. Activities such as these can begin quite early, and as long as they are repeated in a variety of forms which are not too complex, children will have fun

and the skill of whole word recognition will build quite naturally.

When children are able to pick out familiar words within text, they are probably ready to read simple books.

### **Early books and the right to choose stories**

As stated previously, a vital element in helping children to read is to help them enjoy books in a safe, non-judgemental environment from a very early age. This approach should be on-going as children develop and mature.

One of the things I occasionally heard from parents was: 'I covered the picture in her reading book to see if she could read the words, and she couldn't, so she is not reading!'

I always tried to explain that initially children need clues to help them make sense of text. There are always pictures in early reading books and they are there to help give children clues about the story and to aid their enjoyment. If a child is pressurised to decode text without the visual input of a picture, the whole process is likely to become less enjoyable and indeed stressful .... Need I say any more?

I firmly believe that reading with understanding is a complex process which involves a number of skills. The modern approach stresses phonics above all else. I believe that phonics is one of the skills needed. Prediction skills and clues from text and pictures all add to comprehension which is vital for enjoyment.

There are many very good early reading schemes around now, and in this we are fortunate. In years gone by, there was extremely limited availability of good early reading material.

Many of the best schemes today have a selection of books at each reading level. This means that books at each level do not have to be read sequentially, but children can make a personal choice about which books they would like to read. This is a wonderful feature, and one which should be available from the very beginning. In my experience the joy young children get from making their own choice of reading material promotes enthusiasm and self-esteem.

If this system is to work well, it requires preparation by the adults involved. It is preferable for children

who are just beginning to read to be familiar with all the books at the first level.

### **This can be achieved as follows:**

- The teacher/adult can take one book at a time from the scheme and share it with a group of children.
- Look at the cover and the title. Discuss what you can find out about the author and illustrator by looking at the first pages in the book.
- Children can be asked to predict what they think will happen, followed by turning over pages to see if they have been correct, or if there is a surprise at the end of the story.
- The teacher/adult should then read the text of the story to the group and model how it can be read with expression. The children should be able to see and follow the text as the adult reads.
- Discussion about punctuation can be introduced and how it governs the way a story is read.
- The use of capital letters in the story can also be discussed.

If this type of introduction is made for each book in the early levels of any reading scheme before children actually begin to read them independently, they will be well prepared to make their own choices of books. They will be familiar with the characters and the events in the stories and providing all the other preparations have been on-going, they will be able to use phonic decoding skills, word recall, prediction and sequencing in order to read independently and enjoy the experience.

### **The importance of repetition**

Many young children who have just started to read independently love to return a favourite book more than once. To be allowed to do this is important as it will facilitate consolidation as well as enjoyment in the early reading process.

An on-going role for parents, family members and teachers

One of the most important things adults can do for children both before they begin independent reading and after they have become readers is to continue reading to them.

It is valuable, when reading in a one-to-one situation for the adult to have the child beside them. The child then has the opportunity to follow the text

as the adult reads it. Some children will do this naturally and are likely to build a love of literature and the written word. Other children who do not follow text spontaneously will still benefit, and will usually follow some text, but will still become absorbed in the story.

There is some wonderful literature to be enjoyed, and if adults can help children discover this by reading to them, it will be an enriching experience for all concerned.

The choice of books to read to children should be a little in advance of those they are able to read

independently. This means that as children progress in their reading, they will be able to re-visit familiar texts and their reading will be continually extended.

### Conclusion

Helping to facilitate reading skills is a real privilege. It is like giving children the key to a magical kingdom of stories, learning and understanding. Every human being deserves to be given this key and the knowledge of how to use it.



Rhea began her teaching career in a High School in a very deprived part of London in 1970. She was idealistic and soon realised that to make a real difference to the lives of children, she needed to work with younger pupils. She moved to an infant school in 1972 and it was here that she found her passion for teaching children to read. During her career her interest in the early years of education continued and she became an experienced practitioner. When she became a Head Teacher in 1983 she was able to pass on her interest and expertise through in-service training and presentations at meetings and conferences. Now, in retirement she continues to support home schooling and pre-school groups, an adult literacy organisation, and has published a pre-school phonics pack ([www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk](http://www.pre-school-phonics.co.uk)). She is currently working on an all-age phonics system. She is married to artist Christopher Bazeley ([www.chrisbazeley.com](http://www.chrisbazeley.com)). They have two grown up children and six grandchildren. She can be contacted at [rheabazeley@fastmail.fm](mailto:rheabazeley@fastmail.fm)



# Reading and Writing During Early Childhood

**Partha Sarathi Misra**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of developing and nurturing children's ability to read and write during the pre-school days and to explore the possibility of initiating strategies for creating literacy environment for the young children of the non-literate societies. Literacy is held in high esteem in all cultures, and that it is the symbol of prestige and power is proved by many a rhyme, popular saying and folk tale. Let us take the examples of a popular Bengali rhyme and a Hindi saying:

***'likha pada kore jei***

***Gadi ghoda chodesei'***

(He who reads and writes, travels by cars or on horseback)

***'likhai, padayi nehi shikhogi,***

***Tow gadhey ki tarhei rahogi'***

(If you do not learn reading and writing, you will live the life of a donkey)


The Bengali nursery rhyme equates reading and writing with the ability to travel by cars or on horse back while the Hindi saying implies that reading and writing differentiate a man from an animal.

How do children start reading and writing? During my childhood, I was often intrigued by the story of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a great educator and social reformer, who reportedly learnt English numerals even before going to school. According to legend, Iswar Chandra, accompanied by his father, was walking to Calcutta from his native village in November 1828 to be enrolled in a school and as he passed each milestone, he looked closely at the numerals, made mental pictures of those numerals, so that by the time he reached Calcutta he had learned them. Later as an adult, I observed how my kids were drawn to various symbols painted on toys, household goods and how they tried to grasp the printed messages conveyed by written words on

signboards, hoardings, wrappers and the boxes of sweets and the bottles of medicines. I was amazed to notice the slow and unobtrusive ways in which literacy dawned on them even before they were initiated to formal reading and writing on the day of Vidyarambham.

Vidyarambham which marks an auspicious beginning of a child's journey to literacy is generally performed in literate Hindu families. During this ceremony, children are made to sit on the lap of an elderly person, who writes the invocation to Lord Ganapati on the child's tongue with a golden ring and make her write the same with the right index finger on a bed of sand or rice. Many people believe that children should not start reading and writing until and unless this Vidyarambham ceremony is performed! This highly elitist practice ignores the inherent capability of a child who is endowed with an inborn ability to decipher the meaning of symbols and acquires visual literacy right from her birth. The ability to interpret and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image is acquired by a child from her immediate environment. When children look at printed symbols and are drawn by their shapes and colours, they begin to see patterns, they notice when a word belongs to a picture and they can also find out when two words are identical. They 'construct ideas about reading, and writing that are not taught to them, are not modelled for them, and are not yet conventional' (Teale and Sulzby, 1992:52).

If enriching the child's experience is the ultimate goal of early childhood education, parents should not hesitate to introduce reading and writing to their inquisitive children even at a very tender age. If parents can ignite the curiosity and interest of their children in words and in print, they should respond to that interest (Clay, 1991:29). In literate societies, children's urge for reading or the desire to make sense of the printed words comes from



children's listening to stories read to them by their parents. Listening promotes reading, it prepares the ground for the development of the children's visual perception when they are immersed in the print environment.

That there is an intimate relationship between the linguistic development and the cognitive development of the children is an established fact and children have a natural tendency to make numerous language discoveries in consonance with their cognitive development. While playing with other children or interacting with adults, they make numerous experiments with their linguistic skills to socialize themselves appropriately by using socially appropriate norms of the language. They learn how to use words to describe concepts such as present, past and future, up and down or near and far. If they can catch hold of a pen or a pencil they tend to make innumerable dots or small lines on the walls, floors or on the surface of any object available in their immediate vicinity. Making marks with a pen or pencil on any surface presupposes their exposure to similar marks on some objects. 'They make marks which are founded on a motivated relation between meaning and form, signified and signifier' (Kress,1997:73).

How does a child react when she gets a book? She grabs it, opens it, catches hold of a page and often tries to tear the page. Sometimes, looking at the book all by herself, the child will look at the pictures, will talk to them and will pretend reading them. The child who has no idea of the alphabet till now makes no distinction between the picture and the letter of the alphabet. Both are images in print which speak. Pointing at a picture, a child often asks her parents, "What does it say?" The day the child realises that pictures or the printed pages say something interesting, she starts her journey to literacy. Basic literacy concepts like print is spoken words that are written down in a particular way, printed words carry meaning, reading is done from left to right or from the front to the back of the book start dawning on the child only when she is given a chance to handle books, to play with books and to speak to books without the mediation of the parents or the care givers. Goodman (1992:6) has rightly observed, "The beginning of reading and writing occurs in individuals when they develop the awareness that written language makes sense." Input rich environment can only develop this

awareness which is a precondition for emergent literacy. The Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework (2012), prepared by the Ministry of Women and Child development, Government of India has also emphasised the importance of developing emergent literacy during the early childhood.

Any discourse on literacy is often conditioned by our preconceived notion of a literate society and a literate environment. A child in a literate society breathes literacy, she is immersed in literacy and grows up with literacy as an integral part of her all round development. But what about a child of a non-literate society? Is there scope for literacy development among children of parents who are illiterate. In many Indian families, parents cannot dream of the luxury of providing a print-rich literacy environment to their children. The report of the Consultancy on Early Literacy held in Delhi from 25-28 April 2011 observes that for "many children their first active engagement with the written forms of language occurs only when they step into school. Such children need to be gradually initiated into the world of reading and writing, in informal, meaningful and non threatening ways. As these new school goers observe, interact informally and participate freely and purposefully in drawing, scribbling, reading and writing activities in their classrooms, they begin to sort out and acquire knowledge and concepts about the written forms of language."

In order to familiarize the children of non-literate families with the print and to prompt them to read and write on their own, the Anganwadi centres which cater to children in the age group of 0-6 can play a pivotal role in the Indian context. Unfortunately, the Anganwadi workers are not properly trained in the theory and practice of emergent literacy and consequently, they cannot scaffold the literacy experience of the children. The pre-school activities done in the Anganwadi centres are often the simplified versions of the formal reading writing activities done in a formal school setting. While educating parents about child growth and development, the Anganwadi workers can motivate them to provide their children with a print rich environment with the locally available resources. It is not uncommon to see tribal children playing with beads in the courtyard trying to form shapes of different letters which they have noticed

in the Anganwadi centres. Children coming to Anganwadi centres should be encouraged to draw and scribble and the Anganwadi workers should read story books to the children. It has been observed that Anganwadi workers are so overburdened with survey work and nutrition related activities that they find little time to read story books to the children. Irrespective of the socio-cultural background, all children have a natural tendency of responding to different shapes and paintings in their own ways depending on their

previous knowledge and experience. The reason why the children of the disadvantaged section of our society do not learn how to read and write is the threatening manner in which the reading writing activities are introduced by their care givers. If we can introduce reading or writing as a performing art expressing the creative urge of the little children, there is no reason why these children should not be motivated to read and write as a joyful activity.



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# Home Language as the basis of Language Teaching

**Randeep Kaur**

There are many theories and researches based on people's observation of how language happens to children at home and how children are able to speak such complex sentences of their home language. Children at a very early age start communicating flawlessly in the languages that are spoken in their homes. They are effortlessly able to express what they feel, they are curious to know how things happen, they have the ability to question and they know how to reason and analyze situations without any kind of formal education. Language is not only a means of communication but it helps in building up of other cognitive abilities in the child. Therefore, it is important to understand the process by which language evolves in the child.

Having human brains, we have a natural instinct to communicate our thoughts and our first breath itself generates vibrancy. When a child is born she cries and the process of language starts. That cry is itself an indicator that a child has an urge to express!

Upto a point of time, children express what they feel only through crying. They cry when they are hungry, the tone of that cry is different from the cry when they are not feeling well or are uncomfortable. The cry in pain is different from the cry when they are playing.

As and when children grow, they start showing other ways of communicating, For instance, they smile and they also laugh and this process of communicating feelings goes to the next level. Gradually they start picking up words from the environment, although initially they are only able to utter some sounds like mum, baba, hummm.... and children enjoy repeating these sounds invariably in different ways and tones.


As the linguist, Noam Chomsky states, "children have an innate ability to learn languages, because there is a Language acquisition device in the brain, which

gets activated upon receiving the input from the environment, both in terms of language and other signals like touch and feeling. All these signals get noticed and recorded and those inputs take time to settle in the brain, and become intake. This is a gradual and natural process. These intakes are further translated into expressions: that is, the home language I, which children start speaking naturally and start using as a tool to put forth their thoughts."

This entire process from the time the child is born to the time the child starts to communicate takes at least two years of input from the environment. Likewise, when the child comes across the target language or the language of the classroom, she needs the same input-rich environment, where the child is listening to that target language, understanding it, registering it and then speaking it accordingly. By and large in our formal setting we want our children to immediately start understanding the language of the school and begin to speak it, but we forget that they have not had the exposure of the target language.

Children first use language for themselves, for talking to themselves. On observing small kids one can see that they speak the word they come across many times. They use these words for themselves first. Talking to oneself is a meaning-making process for the child, which gets registered in the mind of the child in some form and the child uses that wherever needed in future.

As children further use language for socialising, therefore children need to understand how it is being used and understood by others. For that they have to understand certain structures, which they understand by the process of language acquisition. It happens unconsciously when they are in that environment. In the process they are bound to make some grammatical errors, which should be ignored.



For example: The poems and words that they use while playing may sometimes not be used correctly or may have wrong grammar. This is a process and therefore, they shouldn't be discouraged or corrected.

The home language flourishes through language-rich input and the abstract experiences. Hence, the home language is an effective resource that should be used in the classroom situation when the children come to school in the initial years of their life until the time they are acquainted to the language used in the school. But mostly the prior knowledge of the child (language) and the meaning-making process through the known language is ignored in the real classroom situations.

Therefore, it is important to keep the home language environment as the basis of teaching language in the classroom situations, though there are other factors which supplement the teaching process.

The home language plays a vital role in building an understanding of the second or the third language. Children call 'spoon' as 'chamach' in their home language (Hindi) and they have a fair understanding of its purpose, what it looks like and what all can be done with it. The moment the object 'chamach' is mentioned, the brain starts making connection. And this understanding is extended to second language or the target language. Ignoring child's language in school may result in leading the child to feel de-motivated and discourage her to come to school when she is beginning formal education.

Every word could be put into action and spoken in the child's contextual language as well as the target language. Words without action and contact remain lifeless for the child therefore, it is important to create an environment which permits children to make continuous attempts to link the use of language with life's experience and objects.

The method of experiential learning work wonders because children are in contact with the concrete form of a particular object. The things in and around the school vicinity should be used as a meaningful resource for children. This personal contact with particular things helps children to register in a better manner. They are able to feel and based on their experience are able to talk about it whenever needed.

Another important point to be noticed in small kids is that they keep talking to themselves while doing any activity: it doesn't matter even if they are alone. This mannerism shows that they are trying to figure out and build an understanding for self and they also sustain interest while they are murmuring. This is called a commentary from them. Therefore, when children are doing some activity in the class and are talking to themselves, as teachers we should allow them and give them that space and not take it as noise.

As the concentration span of a child is very short, it becomes important for teachers to use the play-way method where children are doing all sorts of activities. For example, while reciting poetry, children could be asked to enact the poetry along with the teachers.

Putting everything in actions becomes necessary for children because children have a lot of energy and they want to vent. If their energy is suppressed, they become very restless and lose interest in that particular activity.

In the early ages of life many concepts can be introduced through story-telling sessions and these sessions could be so designed that children are asked to become the characters of that story and they could do role play. Further, the stories could be made to draw, those illustrations could be pasted on the walls of the classes, while some words of the story could be used in both the child's contextual language as well as the target language so that the child is able to register fully what has been learnt.

Teachers should not pressurize children to write accurately; rather they should be lenient with them on written tasks in the early years their focus should be more on the verbal and listening activities and let them write as they feel comfortable. Children also form a pattern of scribbling so giving them space on this aspect as this would be beneficial for the child.

Love, individual attention and fear-free environment are the doors that allow children to breathe and nurture in them the traits like creativity and imagination.

Children are very curious and have the ability to question and understand things themselves, therefore they should be given a platform to express these questions from the moment they enter the schools. Likewise, they have an innate ability to

acquire language. They should be given a language rich environment of the target language and take the language acquisition process to the classrooms that is, an informal setting rather than a formal one.

Hence, the home language environment spreads its wings for building an understanding of the target language and broadening the spectrum of expression for the child!



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# School Readiness

Vrinda Datta

The enrollment in primary schools has dramatically increased to 96% (ASER 2013) in the context of right to education. But still the issues of retention, repetition, drop out and learning levels remain greatest challenges in the field of education in India. Therefore child's entry, adjustment and success in school needs to be understood and in this context transition to school becomes a significant event. Transition is used to refer to period of time before and after the child moves from either home or early childhood program (UNICEF, 2012). As acknowledged in literature, for the transition to be smooth, children need to be ready for schools and schools ready for children (UNICEF, 2012). Thus transition and school readiness are linked concepts. In the early literature, school readiness emphasized only on cognitive and academic skills. While now, one looks at school readiness as a more holistic concept. It does not occur suddenly but school readiness can be considered as an outcome of child's life up to now (Janus, Hughes Duku, 2010). Along with this for the school ready child to function, there has to be ready school that will support child's learning and development. Taking these factors into consideration, UNICEF created a model of school readiness where ready families, ready schools and ready children are three important dimensions that interact to create school readiness. Further, it also talks of transition periods where schools, families and communities play an important role.

## Ready Parents

In the early years care and stimulation is primarily provided by parents and caregivers. Parent's involvement and understanding of the various needs and development of children will help them provide right nutrition, stimulation, health care and a caring home environment. Such parents also then look for child care programs that will support their efforts in child care. Families in different

socioeconomic strata will create different opportunities for development. But parental awareness and involvement will help in maximizing use of family resources and also make use of early childhood interventions. Such parents will also be able to show a keen interest in child's adjustment and progress in schools. For this to happen, early childhood programs play a significant role. Parent participation, parent involvement and parent education will help parents become partners in the education and development of children.

## Children ready for school

It is well proven now that the first five years is a window of opportunity to help children reach their optimal development potential. Therefore globally there has been an acknowledgement that early childhood interventions and programs have become essential input for children's development. Further the holistic development approach makes it imperative that children's health, nutrition, and development get equal focus as their synergy is what takes children towards optimal development. In providing inputs for development, the holistic development focus will be to prepare the child to not only be physically ready but also be socially and emotionally competent. As the child reaches pre-school years the specific inputs for cognitive and language skills are important for getting children ready for school. In the process of development the child is also learning and exhibiting behaviours and skills that he uses in the process of learning and interaction. Thus early childhood interventions and programs play a very significant role in getting children ready for school. But for them to be effective they have to be of quality and context specific. Understanding children's socio-cultural context and giving age and culture appropriate activities and materials, will ensure that the program is reaching all children. In India programs are run by Government, NGOs,

Private individuals and organization. As there are no regulatory mechanisms, each one runs programs as per their understanding and abilities to provide a program. However this leads to such variations in quality that the benefits of the programs for children also are vastly different. This effectively means that children come differently prepared for “school readiness” and this will have to be acknowledged by schools and schools then have to get ready for children.

### Ready schools

Having an environment for all children to learn is the most important factor in ready schools. Today under right to education it may be that primary schools are available and accessible to most children. But for schools to help children succeed in their smooth transition to primary schools requires that they recognize and adapt to local needs by using context specific books and materials and curriculum at a pace suitable for children’s abilities. The ready schools need to focus on three main phases 1) pre-transition 2) transition and 3) integration in school. For the pre-transition phase, link with early childhood programs becomes essential. Schools should be aware of the kinds of programs that children in the community are attending, with what experience and learning they are entering schools and so also their socio-cultural context. This helps teachers know how varied the group is in terms of early childhood experiences and what pedagogy she should use to reach out to these children with varied “readiness”. So communication between early childhood workers and school teacher and parents becomes important to help children feel accepted and enthusiastic to participate in the learning process. In the transition phase which is just after the child has entered school, there are lot

of adjustments and challenges the child goes through and the ready school will be aware of this and perhaps will plan very different activities and interaction which will create comfort and familiarity to the school environment, its routines and expectations The ready school will therefore have teachers who will be sensitive to this period of transition and create a transition curriculum with support of the school. It is this teacher who will be able to then judge when children have adjusted and how to now reveal the required curriculum and expectations from children. Such processes help build children’s confidence and help them take on new learning tasks with less apprehension. Thus pre-transition, transition and integration in school are all important parts of ready schools.

### Conclusion

School readiness happens when parents, children and school participate in the process. While each ones role is important, creating the enabling environment can happen when programs and policies are supportive. Access to high quality early childhood programs is essential for getting children ready for schools. There is no denying that school readiness requires better linkages between early childhood programs and primary schools. And finally if we recognize school readiness as an important process for school adjustment and school education, then we must empower teachers with knowledge and skills to be sensitive and child oriented teachers.



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# SECTION C

# RESEARCH IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION





# The teacher as a research participant/consumer and researcher

T S Saraswathi

The present article addresses the significance of the teacher as a researcher in her own right besides being a consumer of research information and a participant in other's research. We will begin by looking at some of the reasons why people do research in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Whether done on a large scale or small scale research in ECCE serves several purposes:

1. It improves ones own understanding of how children learn, how children grow, how early experiences at home and in school help or hinder children's growth and development (physical, social, emotional, intellectual).
2. Knowledge gained through research helps in building a culturally relevant knowledge base others can draw from and use for application, advocacy and policy development.
3. Research provides evidence regarding good practices in early education settings and or on the success and failure of intervention programs aimed at improving young children's lives.
4. Research can also contribute evidence for developing useful policies regarding early education.

Research in ECCE falls broadly into three levels namely, the macro- the mid- and micro-levels. Macro level research is by definition large scale, often covering the entire population like is the case of the census of all children below six attending (or not attending) pre-school. Large scale surveys of teacher availability, teacher qualifications, infrastructure facilities in pre schools at the state or national level, also fall in this group. Surveys conducted by NSSO, ASER, Pratham, Educational Initiatives are all macro level research. This is useful for mapping access, availability, gaps and the like.

The mid level researches usually use a large and representative sample so that the findings can be

generalized. Studies conducted in several places (institutions, states, locations) also fall in the mid level. Studies that aim at standardizing tools (measuring instruments) such that they can be used with large samples are often at this level. Micro level research refers to small scale in depth studies that help explore a new idea, describe the characteristics of a specific sample, or experimental studies that test a given hypotheses.

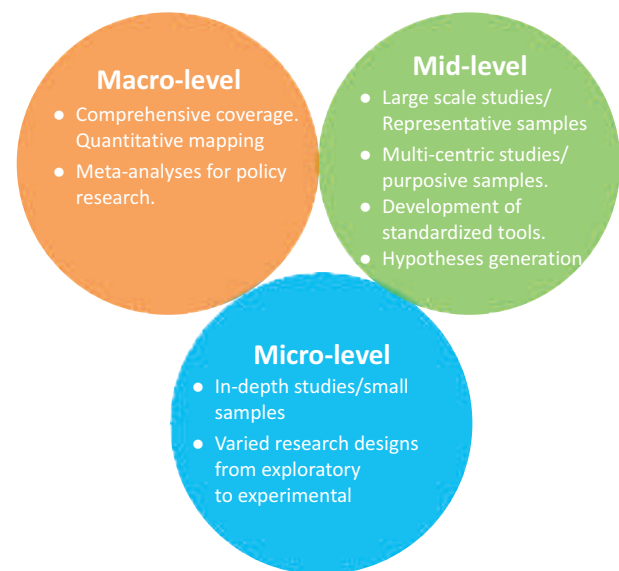


Figure 1. A MULTI-PRONGED AGENDA - RESEARCH IN CARE AND EDUCATION DURING EARLY YEARS

## Teachers' role as respondent at the macro and mid level researches

We will make a very brief mention of the role of the teacher as a respondent in the first two levels of research, namely, the macro and the mid-levels before moving on to the teacher as a researcher, the latter being the thrust of this article. All research in ECCE requires the participation of the teachers either directly or indirectly. Since the teachers' responses are based on the reflection of their own participatory experience, they are invaluable for

understanding the dynamics of class room practices, gaps in implementation of intervention programs and lessons for policy development. Researchers who collect the data are only intermediaries between programs and practices. It is the teacher who provides the needed link and information and hence her contribution is of great significance.

### Teacher as a researcher

In this section we will talk about the significance of the teacher as an action researcher, raising questions, collecting relevant data and analyzing them to seek answers that will in turn be applied in the class room setting, or in her interaction with children and their parents.

We had mentioned earlier, that research is a systematic search for answers to one's questions, fostering the development of a knowledge base in any chosen area of work. This knowledge should be useful to the owner of this fund of information. In this regard, the teacher is at an advantageous and in fact in a enviable position. Her questions relate to how children learn, what makes them motivated, why some children enjoy learning while others do not, and other similar queries. The subjects of her research are those she interacts with on a daily basis and the answers she finds lend themselves to helping children under her care. At the same time it also enhances her feeling of competence and empowers her as a teacher for she has found solutions based on evidence. She is a researcher in action. And what she is good at is action research.

Let us look at few examples of action research in the early education setting:

**Example 1.** The teacher notices that three or four children in the group sit quietly during song time watching the other children sing. After a few days of systematic observation (research strategy) the teacher decides to have the children sit near her during singing time and encourages them to sing helping them with the words when necessary (planned intervention). If the children open up and continue singing even when placed elsewhere (observation) the teacher has evidence that her intervention (experiment) worked.

**Example 2.** The teacher observes that during group exercises to promote numeracy, some children take the lead and complete the tasks while others remain

passive observers. The teacher decides to break up the group in pairs and structures problems where cooperative problem solving is required. If the teacher finds that pairing results in higher scores on numeracy after a few weeks (and perhaps more noise in the class room), than was the case with group learning, the researcher in the teacher has once again found systematic answers to her question "how can I help children learn numeracy?"

**Example 3.** The teacher finds the participation of parents in monthly meetings is very poor. She hypothesizes that sending an oral or written message to the parents through the child is not sufficient. She decides to personalize the invitation through home visits and also develop a sense of ownership in the parents through making them take some responsibilities during the meeting, including ensuring the presence of their neighbors. She uses the opportunity of home visits to collect other information or to discuss the child's progress. Where possible the mobile phone is used to remind the parent the previous evening. If attendance in the next and subsequent meetings improves and is encouraging, the teacher has added another useful item to her fund of knowledge regarding what works and how. Once again, this knowledge is based on a systematic search for answers to real life questions embedded in the teaching-learning setting.

One can go on and on with examples of the teacher as a mentor, teacher as a learner interfaced with teacher as a researcher, observing, intervening, experimenting, hypotheses testing, and above all building a fund of knowledge that is her own! Of course in order to make this entire exercise note worthy an attempt to systematically record the findings empowers the teacher further. It would help to team up with other like minded teachers sharing similar experiences and classroom practices, children, parents and the community. Such teams work in looking for answers to similar problems or challenges faced by them across situations and serves to motivate each other. Even more productive is the experience of sharing these findings in group meetings thereby empowering one's self and the peers.

Research is not the exclusive privilege of the academics in the institutes of higher education. We talk of every child being a curious scientist. Is the



teacher not in a privileged position of fostering the spirit of inquiry in the young scientists and understanding how they learn and grow? What more - the experience of researching can become a self-rewarding and fulfilling experience especially since it enables the teacher to identify and resolve

every problem in the classroom, seen not as a problem but as a challenge to find a resolution. Hence more power to the teacher as a researcher, not one who is only being researched upon!



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# Review of Pre-School Education within The Context of The ICDS Program In Medak District, Andhra Pradesh – A Summary

**'Medak ECE Initiative' Team, Azim Premji Foundation**

Early childhood care and education lays essential foundations for lifelong learning, imbibing basic social values and has bearings on the success at the primary level of education. As per scientific evidence the development of brain in the early years is path way that influences physical and mental health, learning and behavior through the life. It is scientifically proven time and again that gap in early education and efforts to bridge the gap in later school years are directly proportional to each other.

It is essential that the quality of education focuses on the all-round development of the child. Excessive emphasis on the development of cognitive skills impedes development of non – cognitive skills for life.

Research says 0-8 years is the prime age for growth and development of the brain, on the condition that requisite stimulation, opportunities and support are provided by all those involved in the child's ecosystem.

ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) scheme perhaps the world's largest programme aimed at providing health, nutrition, and psycho-social stimulation to young children, started on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1975, in response to the provisions in Indian constitution, national legislations, international declarations which uphold early child education and safeguard child rights. As a result 33 projects were initiated as a pilot phase and currently there are about 7000 ICDS projects in the country. This programme is being executed for more than 3 decades with assistance from the World Bank. The Anganwadi Centers are the primary implementation arm of the ICDS programs.

Almost 73% of children in rural India are said to be enrolled in this programme across almost 14 million Anganwadi centers (AWCs). On the other hand children from affluent families are availing some or

other kind of ECCE facility, starting as early as two years of age with expansion of private schools particularly in urban areas. Rural areas also have seen an active proliferation of private pre-schools.

Azim Premji Foundation is interested in exploring useful programs and interventions in the area of early childhood education, as a natural extension of its current work on school education. Aligning with the Foundation's approach of research-based understanding of the field before undertaking programs and interventions, the Medak Early Childhood Initiative in Andhra Pradesh conducted an exploratory study. This study was undertaken to understand the role of Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) space. The AWCs established under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program of the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare serve as the primary government channel of intervention in early childhood education. By studying the workings of the AWCs, this study attempts to understand some of the challenges in the field of early childhood education. There are eighty six thousand AWCs with 387 projects in Andhra Pradesh. Medak district has 11 projects with 3041 AWCs. A study was conducted in 270 AWCs in 14 Mandals of the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh.

The analysis and interpretation is based on qualitative and quantitative information gathered about the workings of the AWCs. Quantitative information was collected from the entire group of 270 AWCs included in this study. In addition, 78 AWCs were chosen from the larger group for detailed observation of ECE activities and functioning of the AWCs. The overall information gathered can be grouped into three broad categories:

1. Characteristics of the AWCs and the AWC workers;

2. Characteristics of AWC beneficiaries;
3. Assessment of the efficacy of the AWCs

**1. Features of AWCs and AWC Workers (AWWs):**

A majority of the AWCs centers lack adequate physical infrastructure. Only 22% of the AWCs studied run in their own premises. Most centers also do not have basic facilities such as toilets, own source of water etc. The space in most centers is allocated to storage of food and other materials. There is generally no separate demarcated area for pre-school activities. See table 1.

**Table 1**

Higher score on the facility index means greater facilities. Maximum possible score was 11

AW Facility Index	% of Main AWCs	% of Mini AWCs
0	2	36.36
1	12.8	22.73
2	14	22.73
3	25.2	9.09
4	25.6	0
5	13.6	9.09
6	4	0
7	2	0
8	0.8	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

About 12% AW Workers (AWW) do not meet the minimum educational qualification of matriculation pass. Only 55.81% are matriculation pass and 2.33% are not competent enough to read and write while few can just write their name. See table 2.

The training programme for the AWWs comprises of 26 working days of Induction training and a Refresher course for a week. Out of the 26 days, 4 days are allocated for training on the ECCE component. The training program overall is highly inadequate and the refresher course is seldom conducted.

**Table 2**

General education

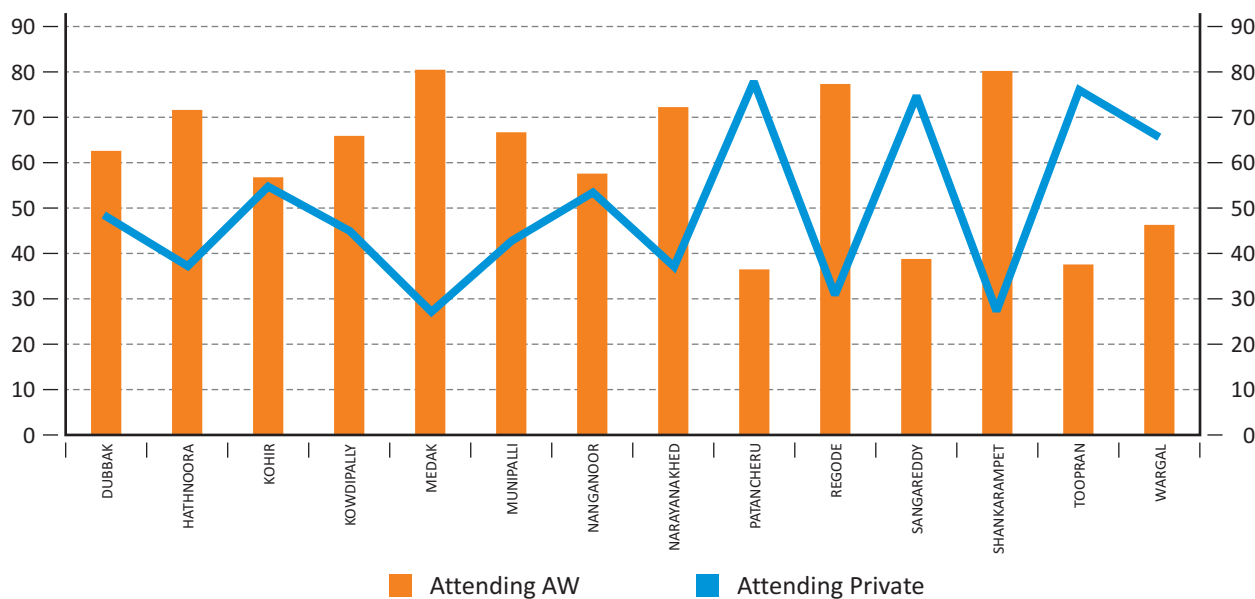
1. Up to class 5th	0.39
2. up to class 7th	1.55
3. Matriculation fail	10.08
4. Matriculation passed	55.81
5. Intermediate passed	19.38
6. Graduation passed	10.47
8. Just literates & illiterate	2.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

## 2. Characteristics of AWC beneficiaries

AWC enrolment varies significantly with location. Enrolment is lowest in urban and more remote areas. The following graph shows enrolment in different Mandals. There are however further variations within a Mandal as some villages are remote while the ones near to the Mandal headquarters and town, are relatively more urbanized. Enrolment is higher in villages that are more vulnerable in socioeconomic terms. See chart 1.

Chart 1

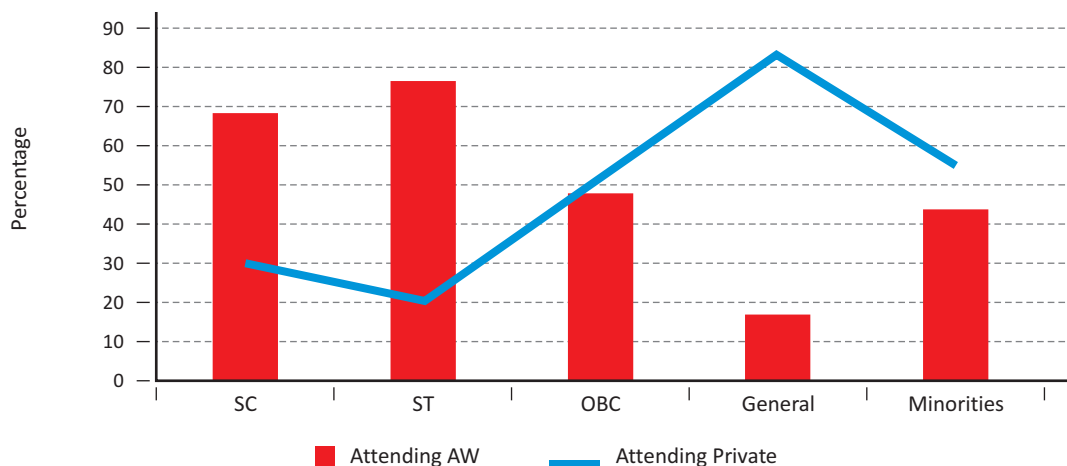
ENROLMENTS RATES MANDALWISE



Among children who are in pre-school, enrollment rate in AWC is greater for households with illiterate parents. Households with higher socioeconomic conditions are less likely to send their children to AWCs. Children of literate parents have higher enrollment rates in private schools rather than AWCs. Children of unskilled labourers have low enrollment rates in any kind of pre-school (AWC or private). Moreover 30% of children in the 3-6 years age group are currently not enrolled in any pre-school (government, private or AWC). See Chart 2 below.

Chart 2

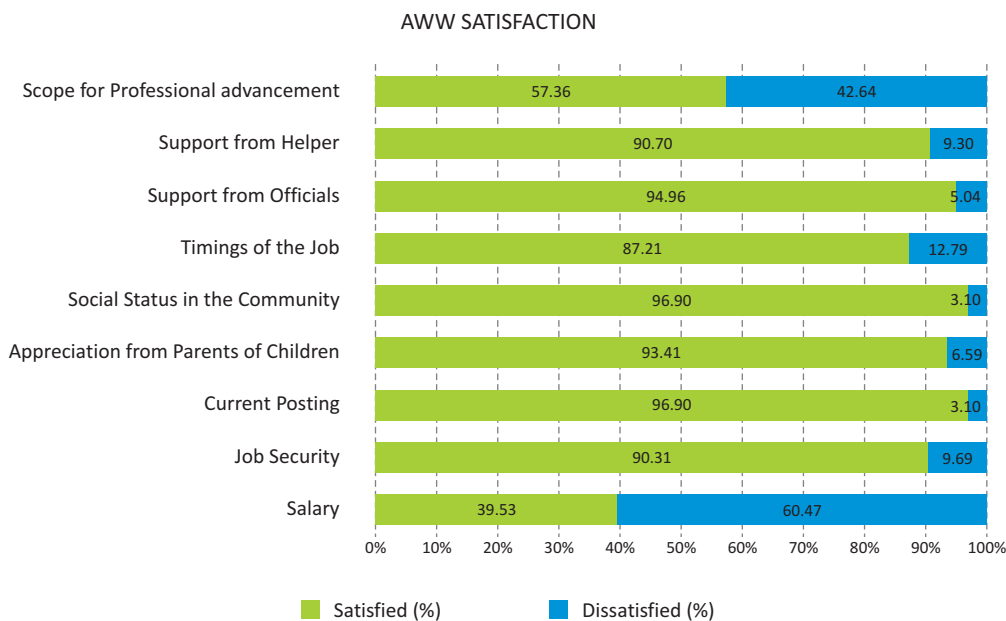
ENROLMENTS IN AW vs SOCIAL CATEGORY



### 3. Efficacy of the AWCs

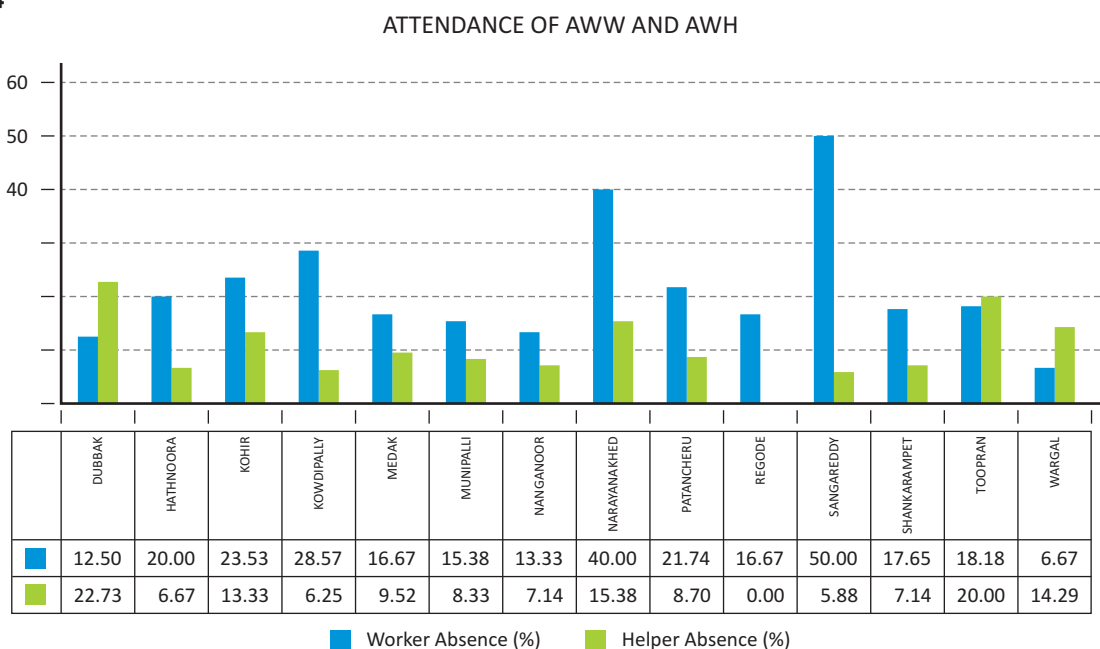
It is evident that not all the AWW are satisfied with their jobs. However aspects of greater dis-satisfaction are the salary and the professional development. Apparently they need further support to do their job proficiently. See Chart 3 below.

Chart 3



Irregular attendance is a major issue for the Anganwadi system in Medak. Only 43% of the enrolled students (3-6 age group) attend AWCs regularly.

Chart 4



Many workers also do not follow the scheduled times or the timetable of ECE activities. The qualitative observation of select AWCs indicates that the absence of AWWs affects activities related to pre-school education more than other services.

While Anganwadi workers (AWWs) self-report that they conduct a high level of pre-school education activities, this was not supported by the qualitative observations done as part of this study. The activities revolve mainly around conversations, rhymes and songs, games and good habits. Nearly 90% AW Workers conduct these activities daily. AW Workers report no difficulty in undertaking these activities. Creative activities including arts and crafts happen less regularly, about once a week in 70% of the AWCs. About 50% of the workers report that it is not feasible to conduct activities around scientific knowledge and cultural awareness 50% of the workers report that they follow the modules and instructional manuals, every day with another 38% doing it once a week.

41% of parents say that they are expecting good teaching from AWCs. Though only 5% of parents visit AWCs to seek information regarding the education of the child, which means there is negligible involvement of parents.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate some relationship between demand for pre-school education and the socio-economic conditions of the village and the parents. The exact nature of this relationship needs to be investigated further. There is a greater demand for AWCs from sections of society that are more vulnerable in socioeconomic terms. This may have an impact on the provision, sustenance and growth of the AWC and these implications should be kept in mind while planning any interventions.

The high worker absence is similar to the rates of school teacher absence across the country. This indicates that there may be some structural issues, which need to be tackled differently. AWWs receive very little training on ECE. A poor starting point (a total of 4 days of initial training given at the time of appointment) and poor subsequent support system, provides very limited scope for the sustenance of ECE activities. Any new training initiatives will also have to address the needs and constraints of the supervisors and CDPOs in adequately providing support to the AWWs.

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## Abbreviations

- AWC** : Anganwadi Center  
**AWH** : Anganwadi Helper  
**AWW** : Anganwadi Worker  
**ECE** : Early Childhood Education  
**ICDS** : Integrated Child Development Service  
**CDPO** : Child Development Project Officer



# Perception of primary school teachers about the quality of pre-school education provided by anganwadis

Sumit Arora

A couple of months ago, I was reading about Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India and came across the new drafts for the policy framework, quality standards and curriculum for pre-school education by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD). One of the aims of ECCE is to make a child school ready by providing emergent literacy and math skills and I started wondering about how do we know if a child is actually school ready or not? So, I decided to meet with a few primary school teachers to understand if they thought that the children who came to their schools after attending anganwadis were actually school ready, and if not what did they expect of children who attended anganwadis and what suggestions did they have for improving the quality of pre-school education provided by anganwadis.

Before getting into the details of the interviews here is a little background. In 1975, under the MWCD the government of India introduced the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) to provide holistic development to the child and provide training to caregivers. The ICDS is provided through government run anganwadis managed by an anganwadi worker and a helper and offers a package of health, nutrition and pre-school education services to children, from prenatal to the age of six years and to pregnant and lactating mothers. The services offered by anganwadis include supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-up, referral services, nutrition & health check-up and pre-school education.


I spoke to my research teacher and decided to conduct my interviews in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. I chose Medak because a team of Azim Premji Foundation is already working with the anganwadis there and I could get help from them as I am a student of the Azim Premji University. After interacting with the Azim Premji Foundation team I

finalized my tools and interviewed 5 primary school teachers. The language was a barrier as I do not speak Telugu and the teachers were not very comfortable with English and Hindi, but a member from the Foundation helped with the interpretation and the interviews went on seamlessly. My findings are broken down according to themes and I have also referred to some studies that have spoken about similar issues.

## Children's performance

The teachers unanimously agreed that there was no difference in the literacy and numeracy skills of children who attended anganwadis and those who did not. The curriculum draft for the ECCE states that the anganwadi must prepare the children for school by proving emergent literacy and mathematical skills (MWD, 2012). Some teachers went to the extent of saying that anganwadis were useless as long as pre-school education was concerned. A study conducted by Rao (2010) where she evaluated 2 anganwadis in Andhra Pradesh stated that the quality of pre-school education provided was very poor according to the pre-school quality developed by the west.

However, a few teachers did agree that the children who attended anganwadis had better motor skills as compared to the children who did not attend anganwadis. The teachers also said that they found it easier to teach children who had attended anganwadis because they were used to staying away from home and did not get restless when their mothers were not around. These children are not shy of singing and dancing, as they are used to these activities in the anganwadi, and that makes it easier for the teachers. As one teacher said, "the children who attend anganwadis are like halogen lamps, and the other who don't are like tube lights".



None of the teachers commented on the performance of students who attend private pre-schools as these children then go ahead and enrol themselves in private schools, and the teachers being interviewed were all working in government schools. However, they believed that children in private pre-schools would do better than children in the anganwadis primarily because private schools are more accountable to the parents because they charge a fee.

### **Teacher's expectation**

The teachers' expectations from the children who come into primary school having attended anganwadis were not very different from the ones mentioned in the curriculum draft for ECCE. These included, knowledge of the alphabet in Telugu (mother tongue) and English and awareness of numbers. Some teachers also mentioned that children should have fine motor skills and listening skills. They also believed that the anganwadis should develop hygiene habits in children and encourage them and their parents to be regular to school. Unfortunately, there is lack of research documenting the expectations of primary school teachers about their expectations from the anganwadis regarding the pre-school component. However, it seems important to take their considerations into account because one of the goals of ECCE is to make children 'school ready' and if primary school teachers do not think that these children are school ready then there is a need to work on improving the quality of the pre-school program.

### **Reasons for poor performance of pre-schools**

On discussing the reasons for why the teachers thought the anganwadis were not being able to meet the expectations of primary school teachers, every one said that the anganwadi workers were over-loaded with work and could not give adequate attention to the pre-school component. Pre-school education requires the most time and effort as compared to the other 5 services provided by anganwadis and hence it is often neglected (Sharma, Sen and Gulati, 2008). Rao (2010) also mentions that the anganwadi workers are so over-worked that the education component in the ICDS does not receive adequate attention. Dreze (2006) says that not only has pre-school been neglected by ICDS but even researchers and authors have

concentrated more on the food matters. The teachers also said that the anganwadi workers had a lot of paper work to maintain which took up a lot of their important time and this is considered important because all supervisors check the records when they come for monitoring. In a small scale study, Rao (2010) found out that an anganwadi worker spent about 45 minutes every day interacting with children whereas the curriculum draft requires them to spend 4 hours. The rest of the time is spent maintaining records and other administration work.

Another reason cited for poor performance of pre-schools in the anganwadis was lack of training of the anganwadi worker to provide early childhood education. The government provides 26 days of pre-service training to anganwadi workers of which only 4 days are spent on training for the pre-school component (Sharma, Sen and Gulati, 2008). A working group report (2008) states that the current training is centrally determined and hence is divorced from field realities.

The teachers also said that the compensation of the anganwadi worker was very low as compared to the work-load and this might be a disincentive.

### **Recommendations**

As work-load was the biggest reason for failure of anganwadis in providing quality pre-school education, the recommendation, logically, was to reduce the work load. A few suggestions that came about during the discussion included:

1. Hiring another anganwadi worker who exclusively takes care of the pre-school component. This would reduce the pressure on a single anganwadi worker and develop a specialized pre-school trainer. Another benefit from this would be that in the absence of one anganwadi trainer, the other could take charge. A working group report (2008), states that it is essential to have a two anganwadi workers so that one can focus on children below the age of three and the other can focus on the pre-school component of children from 3 to 6 years of age.
2. Increase monitoring and supervision of anganwadis with a focus on observing the quality of education provided and not on record keeping. Rao (2010) also suggests that there should be a system to assess the holistic development of children at regular intervals.

3. Getting pre-school under the control of schools or locating anganwadis in schools instead of the community. Dipa Sinha (2006) mentions that anganwadi centers linked to primary schools have better attendance as younger children come to the center with their siblings. This also motivates the anganwadi worker as she feels a part of a larger institution.

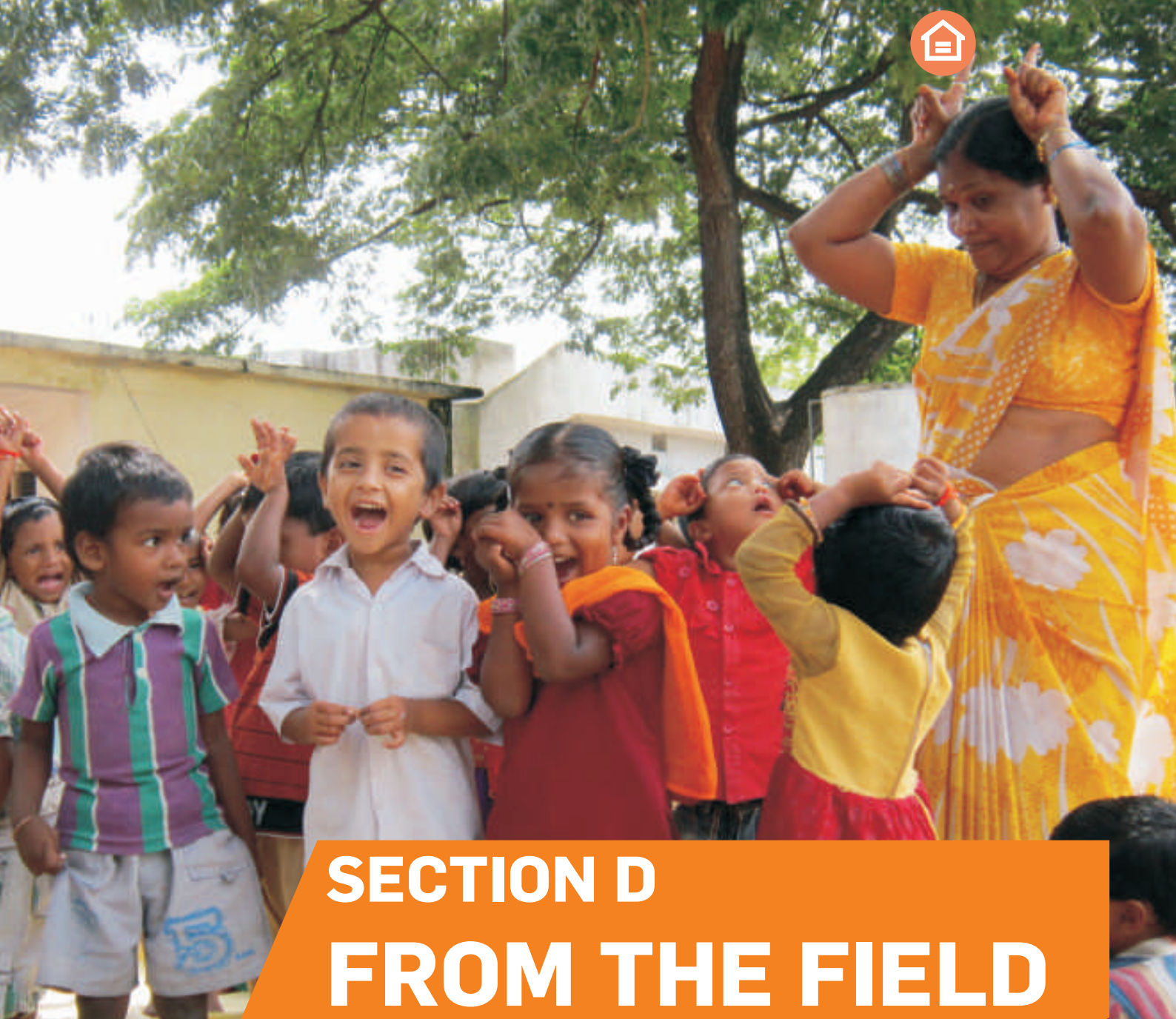
Even though the sample size for this report was very small, it still gives an idea of the issues with the

quality of pre-school education component of ICDS. Some of the recommendations mentioned above should be given due consideration. It will not serve any purpose to just universalize ICDS without ensuring quality and if the government of India is serious in impacting lives of the 158 million children below the age of 6 then some quick action is recommended.

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**SECTION D**  
**FROM THE FIELD**



# Recognising the Rights of Unheard Voices

Apoorva Patel

As Gabriela Mistral (1948) rightly said that -“We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer "Tomorrow".His name is "Today".”

Early Childhood Education (ECE), meaning the pre-school years, is when a holistic curriculum is developed across different domains of development. The cognitive, social, language and emotional development are of equal importance to a child. In these terms ECE provides prospects for interaction, affection, stimulation, learning through exploration and discovery. It contributes in holistic development of young children and promotes school readiness through play way activities and materials.

It is globally acknowledged that the first eight years of child life are the most critical formative years for lifelong development and there are several known reasons behind this. Numerous researches in the field provide convincing evidence which proves that ‘experience based brain development in the early years sets neurological and biological pathways that affect health, learning and behavior throughout life’.(For example: Chatterjee P., 2007. Child malnutrition rises in India despite economic boom. Lancet)

Some significant observations at the grassroots level raise issues and concerns for poor transformation of ECCE (or Early Childhood Care and Education) programmes into a field reality

- Despite the availability of various government early childhood services such as early learning activities and nutrition services, many children/families either have a very little access

or the quality of the available services delimit the access or are simply excluded from the access.

- Even after special efforts for facilitating convergence between various ministries and departments responsible for nutrition, health, early education and development of children, still there is lack of coordination, convergence and also low awareness and clarity regarding ECCE among functionaries and families.
- Absence of policy and action framework, supervision and monitoring at all levels is the other critical area demanding immediate attention.

The following is a direct observation from the field (basically focusing two issues under a big umbrella) which gives another view of ECE centres from the viewpoint of ‘Equity & Inclusion’

In my visit to some of the ECE (Anganwadi) centres at certain clusters of Uttarkashi district, a very evident example of equity & inclusion was observed and thus can make one believe a philosophy that *“Our task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within ourselves that we have built against it”*.

Undoubtedly there is a lot to applaud on the issue of equity & inclusion with focus on ECE Centre’s (Anganwadi centres i.e. AWCs). But of course, with many pros, some cons also do exist. Inequity or exclusion is when systematic discrimination is practiced against various reasons beyond control, and one such reason is differently abled (children) with special need & care. The factors may be varied but, for instance, social factors – which are deep-rooted in socio-cultural practices, are responsible for this exclusion (visible & invisible too).

**Differently-abled children** are sympathized with or made to feel unusual by being kept aloof from other kids at the centre or being provided with special

considerations which draws attention of other children/outsiders or by being introduced differently to visitors. Sometimes there is frequent mention of some quite apparent reasons behind improper functioning of a part of the body. These things were clearly visible in the visits to the centres and in interaction with Anganwadi teachers or helpers. This evidently affects the child's confidence, responsiveness, expressions, emotions, participation and makes her/him unnecessarily sensitive towards her/his abilities. Where EQUITY is concerned it takes into account varied needs of the child and aims at approaches which could respond to specific needs. At the level of ECE, apart from taking special care of children with special needs, it is also about being concerned about relative disparities or disadvantages (in this case, psychological or emotional, physiological, etc.) within the classroom, family or society in accessing/utilising services. The area of concern is provision of services to be made to overcome the disadvantages. At a larger level, it is about accessibility of services to those without any significant representation or inability to articulate demands, etc.

The process of inclusion is also not just about providing access to services (one of the main responsibility of AWC), but to have community involvement in all the process of ensuring their rights & thus, recognise their needs, promoting their important role in planning & managing service delivery & providing training/awareness/education to ensure sustainability.

Thus, recognising and understanding the differential needs of different children (each child is unique in her/his own way) and also identifying, supporting & implementing appropriate solutions.

Another significant problem that often seems to be overlooked at the ECE centres is absence of safe sanitation facilities and hygiene practices, though provision of proper sanitation and attempts for its universal coverage (including public institutions) has always been a challenge for a country like ours. Yet today, this is a shameful fact that these children coming to the ECE centres defecate in the open; this is a factor contributing to the most appalling concentration of disease among them and the poor standards of hygiene. The questions arising here are- who are these children, whom do they belong

to, whose responsibility are they, why are they left out, not reached or not served, why do they not use facilities or practice the key behaviors so crucial for their own health and hygiene.

The observation and analysis behind this issue reinforces what is already known: that equity and inclusion are not a matter only of no discrimination based on caste, religion, region, gender, economic status, etc. but also that all sections of people are reached and served and not shut out for any reasons.

In the case of ECE centres, the issue of sanitation and hygiene practices may be getting overlooked because it requires extra effort and energy from the worker's or the helper's side as the children attending centre belong to the age group of 2.5 – 6 years. Even if it is not so, then also mere commitment to action will not work, unless policies, investments and actions are based on the principle of equity, which is essentially the principle of fairness. Equity and inclusion comprise acknowledging that each child is different and needs specific support and care as well as measures to overcome the specific impediments that stand in the way of their being able to access and use services sustainably.

The journey in this field has been a personal adventure of reaching out and beyond, into places of the heart and mind I always wanted to explore and work with. It gives me junctures and moving encounters to recount the wonder of innocent, unpredictable lives, of the struggles, dreams, triumphs and the spirit behind such policies and programmes. I see following as some of the recommendations which can significantly help to improve the design and therefore effectiveness of ECE programme.

- A community mobilization initiative (like Udaan Yatra undertaken in Chhattisgarh) to generate community awareness on the importance of parenting as well as the criticality of Early Childhood Education as part of the ICDS
- A joint assessment of ground realities and suggest strategies for appropriate policy and implementation to strengthen ICDS
- An assessment of the effectiveness of implementation of the ECE approach at the ground level from conception, planning and

allocation of resources to interdepartmental convergence and existing capacities within government, processes of material development, training and capacity building strategy and methodology

- Along with the above a review of the processes, challenges and outcomes in terms of enhancing capacities of the ECE/ICDS functionaries in implementing the ECE/ECCE programme
- Ascertain and suggest suitable implementation strategies like training, monitoring mechanism/s, so as to strengthen the convergence among the stakeholders, shift of ECE component (as ECCE) from WCD Department to Education Department (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) and follow-up support
- Understanding the processes, challenges and constraints faced in development and distribution of material, resource allocation, training, follow-up and monitoring of functionaries involved in instituting & implementing ECE, convergence with other departments, and roles played by each stakeholder; and in view of these identifying strategies for strengthening ECE
- Documenting and disseminating the experiences, promising practices and lessons learnt from states performing well in ECE and suggesting replicable models for integration in ICDS would serve as a significant instrument for motivation and change.

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# Creating an Ecosystem for Effective Engagement with the ICDS System - Akshara Foundation's Pre-school Education Programme



Vaijayanti K

## Background

Globally, research in Early Childhood Education suggests that a child's early environment and experiences contribute significantly to his or her development. In a rich and supportive environment, children have many opportunities for learning, and cognitive development assumes a central role. The National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy in India reaffirms the commitment of the Government of India to provide integrated services for the holistic development of all children from the prenatal period to six years of age.

In the last decade, India has achieved considerable progress in vastly improving inputs to public education, making gains in school access, infrastructure, student enrolment, teacher salaries and pupil-teacher ratios, among others. However, it has been consistently observed<sup>1</sup> that students' academic gains are very low. The concept of "learning outcomes" is slowly finding a place in the education planner's lexicon as the focus shifts from school access to school quality. Pre-school education (the education and care of children in the age group 0-6 years in order to make them school-ready) is a critical link in any robust education system.

Studies by Nobel Prize laureate Jim Heckman have shown that pre-school education has positive impact on children's socioeconomic outcomes along with cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. Further, Heckman's research shows how early interventions are powerfully predictive of adult success and failure and how effective pre-school education can partially offset the disadvantages of early adversity. Longitudinal studies on The High Scope Perry Pre-school Programme and the Abecedarian Programmes show substantial gains in

children's cognitive as well as non-cognitive abilities as a result of a substantially enriched early environment. Aboud (2006) finds that children who attended pre-school fare better than those who didn't on the parameters of "vocabulary, verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning, and school readiness." Similar results were also published by Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, Waldfogel (2004), who found that "children who attended a centre or school-based pre-school programme in the year before school entry perform better in assessments of reading and math skills upon beginning kindergarten, after controlling a host of factors that might be associated with selection into early education programmes and relatively high academic skills. This advantage persists when children's skills are measured in the spring of kindergarten and first grade, and children who attended early education programmes are also less likely to be retained in kindergarten. In most instances, the effects are largest for disadvantaged groups, raising the possibility that policies promoting pre-school enrolment of children from disadvantaged families might help to narrow the school readiness gap."

It was against this background that Akshara's pre-school education programme was developed.

## Akshara's Experience

Akshara began its **School Preparedness Programme** across 200 Integrated Child Development Service centres called (ICDS) anganwadis in Bangalore in 2006-07 with the help of paid instructors who delivered a pre-school component for two hours a day. In 2009 this programme was redesigned as the Pre-school Education Programme by providing teaching-learning materials (TLMs) to support a developmentally appropriate, play-based

<sup>1</sup>ASER Reports (2007-2012), PISA Report (2012)

curriculum aligned to the curriculum implemented by the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) in the anganwadis. The programme simultaneously built the capacity of the anganwadi worker and helper to effectively deploy the TLMs - in a child-centred, play-based manner and to measure the learning outcomes of children. In addition, the re-designed programme prepared guidelines for Bal Vikas Samithis, community support mechanisms for anganwadis, and trained its members with a focus on pre-school education.

Akshara has implemented its preschool programme: in non-notified slums in Bangalore (as an action-research project); in balwadis run by women entrepreneurs as private pre-schools; and a third worker model<sup>2</sup> in collaboration with anganwadi centres. However, the largest reach has been a model that is implemented in collaboration with the WCD in anganwadi centres and is the focus of this paper.

### **Akshara's Pre-school Education Programme**

The main objective of Akshara's pre-school education programme is to put a 'structured' pre-school programme in place with key inputs of high quality TLMs and capacity building of teachers. To this end, the programme trained instructors to deliver 90 minutes of daily pre-school education. This was supported with a well-designed, research based pre-school kit for supporting development across multiple domains. The programme also had a robust training and monitoring component as well as a commitment to community engagement through the activation of Bal Vikas Samithis.

### **Four Key Components of the Programme**

**1. The School Preparedness Kit/Teaching Learning Materials:** The National Curriculum Framework 2005 envisages the curriculum for pre-school education as activity based, child-centred, age appropriate, aiming at all-round development, adapted to context, and flexible. Further, NCF cites that there is a dearth of material, which is often used more for purposes of display than actual play and learning. ICDS Karnataka has provided a resource book and ad hoc 'play materials' which needed to be linked to learning objectives. Akshara found this gap in structured

teaching learning materials, 'The missing link' is structured material for activity based learning. To fill this gap Akshara developed a kit with innovative and cost-effective TLM. Around 40 items find a place in the kit, designed in consultation with the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare, National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) and ICDS and distributed to all anganwadis in the programme's reach. The kit supports a child-centric, activity-based approach to learning, allowing children to work individually and in small groups.

- 2. Capacity Building:** Anganwadi workers who are also pre-school instructors are untrained and lack knowledge about the methodology of structured pre-school education. The capacity building of anganwadi workers and helpers is critical for the effectiveness of the programme. Akshara's training addresses a range of issues from segregation of children by age, classroom management, and usage of kit to child assessment. The programme includes an orientation component for ICDS's supervisory functionaries as well, for continued support to the workers.
- 3. Activation of Bal Vikas Samithis:** Along with training for anganwadi workers, Akshara designed a package aimed at BVS members about the role of their support system and how they can identify issues at the anganwadi level and find local solutions through collective efforts.
- 4. Measuring Learning Outcomes:** Age-specific learning outcome indicators were developed with the objective of measuring the learning/development levels of children. The assessment tool includes skill based indicators representing all domains of child development and is activity based. The programme administers a pre and post-assessment to all children covered by the programme.

### **Pre-school Education Programme in Anganwadis**

Akshara implemented the pre-school programme in all 1776 anganwadis in Bangalore Urban District from 2009 to 2012. During this period the learning

<sup>2</sup>For further reference visit [www.akshara.org.in](http://www.akshara.org.in)

outcomes of children were measured and tracked. All 1776 anganwadi workers were trained and around 14300 BVS members were also trained.

In 2012, Akshara invited the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi, to carry out an independent evaluation<sup>3</sup> of its preschool programme in anganwadis in Bangalore Urban District. The evaluation found that Akshara's intervention was planned in a holistic frame to cover all aspects of systemic reform, including teaching-learning materials, environment, training of all levels of functionaries, monitoring, and community participation. The study concluded that the model is worthy of appreciation, especially at the scale at which it was implemented. Further, the study felt that the programme's most significant contribution was the development of 70 specific quality-related indicators for assessing the status of anganwadis and the assessment framework of 56 indicators to

track the annual progress of children. CECED determined that this is a significant step forward in creating a much-needed focus on accountability and outcomes.

Currently, Akshara's pre-school programme is being implemented in 335 anganwadis in Bangalore Urban District. Many of the components of the programme are being incorporated by the Department of Women and Child Development in its upcoming, updated policy on Early Childhood Education. Some of the challenges, however, include an understanding of the delivery mechanism of the pre-school curriculum; the capacity of anganwadi workers who are expected to be pre-school instructors besides fulfilling a variety of community and administrative responsibilities; systemic issues like pre-service and in-service training; regular supervision, and inadequate infrastructure. These still need to be addressed.

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<sup>3</sup> Access report on [www.akshara.org.in](http://www.akshara.org.in)

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Vaijayanti currently heads the research function of Akshara Foundation - a not-for-profit organisation focussed on early childhood and elementary education in Karnataka. She has been working on issues ranging from Early Childhood Education to School education. Most of her research work has been evidence-based policy research in the education sector. She also heads ASER- Karnataka. She can be contacted at [vaijayanti@akshara.org.in](mailto:vaijayanti@akshara.org.in)



# Hands To Hearts International

Hands to Hearts International (HHI) is a NGO focused on improving the health and development of vulnerable children (ages 0-3) globally by training caregivers in early childhood development (ECD) and nurturing parenting skills.

## What Does HHI Do?

HHI provides a simple, adaptable, cost-effective and culturally relevant training program. HHI's training empowers women/care-givers to improve their ability to nurture their children's language, social, cognitive and physical development, and to best support their health and nutrition. It also cultivates attachment, establishing the base for all future relationships and a healthy social fabric. By providing quality information on ECD and connecting this to culture-specific tools, traditions and practices, HHI's information is applicable anywhere and meaningful regardless of resources or literacy.



## History of HHI in India

HHI began working in partnership with orphanages in southern India in 2006. Within a year, India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) started sending Aganwadi Workers and Helpers, and to date, approximately 4,000 have been trained in HHI's ECD training.

HHI's core operating partner is **Viswa Yuva Kendra**, a community development organization based in Odisha that works primarily with impoverished rural populations.

In 2012, **Save the Children India contracted HHI** to apply its methodology to create their first program for children 0– 3 in Andhra Pradesh. HHI trained 17 master trainers at Save the Children. These master trainers subsequently trained 292 ICDS workers, and 6,700 mothers, and ultimately benefited 10,000+ vulnerable infants.

Through these various partnerships, **more than 22,000 caregivers** (ASHAs, SHG participants, orphanages' care-givers, crèches workers, ICDS workers, and mothers) **in India have participated in HHI's training**; in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Odisha, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh.

## Benefits Of HHI's Training

### For children

- Lower episodes of illness and stress
- Improved weight gain and nutritional status
- Greater bonding with caregiver
- Improved health and overall development

### For women and care-givers

- Knowledge gain on ECD of 35% to 40%
- In Uganda, 193% increase in mothers providing linguistic learning to their baby
- 100% increase in providing cognitive stimulation; interacting while feeding their baby; and in time spent playing with their baby
- Lower corporal punishment and stress
- Improved nutrition planning, feeding practices

### For communities

- Empowered women and community members
- Lower long term social costs
- Improved social cohesion
- More child friendly interactions in communities

### HHI WORKS VIA PARTNERSHIPS

HHI's model is extremely flexible and adaptable to the needs and realities of its partners and the communities they serve. HHI's program is highly replicable, using a Training of Trainers (ToT) model, with follow up support, to build the capacity of partners and care-givers to improve ECD for vulnerable children.

### Recognition of HHI's Work

- The Asia Regional Network on Early Childhood researched HHI's work in Odisha as a promising practice, their research was published in 2011 ARNEC report.
- In Odisha, an evaluation of HHI's program funded by the Fetzer Institute is underway.
- Advisor to UNESCO Asia on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2011-2013.





# Integrating Reggio Emilia's philosophy into India's Pre-schools

**Nina Kanjirath**

The very idea that Early Childhood Education plays a crucial role in a child's development was a relatively novel one in the early 2000's, which eventually led me back to Geeta Narayanan, the then Director of Mallya Aditi International School, who set us on the Reggio Emilia pathway.

Reggio, like all other methodologies, had its inception and creation in time and space. "Developed by a teacher - Loris Malaguzzi, along with the parents of the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy after a great and destructive World War II, it was believed that children were in need of a new way of learning: the assumption was that people form their own personality during early years of development and, moreover, that children are endowed with a hundred of languages. The aim of this approach is teaching how to make them useful in everyday life. The program was based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum" (Source: Wikipedia)

For our Early Learning Center, we had found a connection. We embraced its overall philosophy, secretly delighted that many of the aspects of Reggio, especially the "self-guided curriculum" permitted us flexibility and the capacity to explore, research and adapt to the local flavor and conditions.

The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based primarily on the following set of principles:

- children must have some control over the direction of their learning
- children must be able to learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing

- children have a relationship with other children and with material items in the world that children must be allowed to explore and
- children must have endless ways and opportunities to express themselves.

(Source: Wikipedia)

Our physical space set up under Reggio's flexible terms started with the environment as the third teacher, a courtyard and several nooks for children to meet and interact often, a seamless (and doorless) merging of the inside-outside (here we were hugely advantaged by the salubrious Bangalore climate), welcoming of parents at all times into the space that their children were to thrive in and, above all, a deep respect for all things that came our way. So also a garden that was chemical free and full of trees, falling leaves, flowers, fruits, many-legged residents and visiting ones too and an atmosphere of hundred languages that encouraged children to be themselves, share and negotiate with each other constantly.

We were determined that as far as possible, no conditioned adult world would 'shape' the child's character with any kind of bias or preconceived notions and so we set forth to develop a curriculum that would leave children excited about their relationship with the external world and with such a deep knowledge and understanding of themselves that nothing that they encountered was to shake or destroy their confidence in themselves.

Teachers were encouraged to learn from the conversations between children and document it. One aspect of Reggio particularity excited me - the idea of 'provoking' children's thinking and problem-solving abilities, so out of this was born our hands-on Science Programme.

Coming from a generation that entertained ourselves mainly with books, I was confident that the key to developing self-learners had its basis in developing a love and passion for reading. Another novel experiment partly based on observations of my own hyperactive behavioral needs, led me to decide that all children could choose how often and when they needed to move or sit, stand, walk about, chat, revisit outcomes as often as they needed, and even control their own learning curve. Observation of this freedom of action led to some amazing consequences and conclusions. Teachers became stress-free, talked gently, affectionately, and began to enjoy their relationships with everyone around and hierarchy and conflict went for a very long walk. It created a safe environment that allowed the making of mistakes as a form of learning- a radical but perhaps one of the most effective learning tools for both teacher and child. The children hardly ever sat, but if they did it was for specific reasons of their own choosing - forming constantly changing groups or to complete tasks or during eating and learning became joyful and natural – substantiated by a low chatter of childish voices that softly permeated the atmosphere.

To implement and adapt Reggio in India required courage and a belief that “all children have rights and are beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires.”(Source: Wikipedia)

To follow Reggio Emilia requires teachers to be excited and in constant reflection of their own learning. This requires a fundamental change in teaching methods and attitudes because much of our teaching is translated and delivered, not even through our training programmes, but from how we were actually taught as children!



Nina is the Director of Gaia Pre-school and Childcare Center at R.T. Nagar, Bangalore ([www.gaiapreschool.com](http://www.gaiapreschool.com)). She has over 30 years of experience as a teacher trainer, curriculum developer, and pre-primary and elementary school educator having worked in a New Zealand kindergarten, the British and American International Schools in Sri Lanka and Indonesia and in Mallya Aditi International School, Bangalore. She developed multi-media lessons and trained teachers at Schoolnet, India in the application of a multi-sensorial approach, combining it with the use of technology in the classroom. She has written directed and produced several plays for children, has a background in Art and Western Classical Music and is a founder member of The Bangalore Wine Club. She worked with Christel House, India (a school for underprivileged children) and Oasis International School to help rethink curriculum and classroom practices. She can be contacted at [kanjirath@yahoo.com](mailto:kanjirath@yahoo.com)



## 'Child's Play' is 'Work'.... is the view in Steiner-Waldorf early childhood education

**G. Manivannan**

Remember your own childhood days. Whizzing recklessly down the street, we boys with short knickers, with bruised knees and triumphant facial expressions and a stick in hand wheeled old and disused scooter tyres. We stood on the steps of the entrance and played "On the bank-In the river" in its myriad variations. We simply sat down and played with the traditional five stones, tamarind seeds or sea shells. We roamed in our own groups and made adventurous journeys picking mangoes and guavas. We ran, we played, we laughed, we climbed trees and we fell and we got back to our feet again and most importantly we sweated. A reminder call from our parents and we were inside the house to wash ourselves and study or eat the simple meal together as a family. TV was an uncommon device.

Cut the scene some 25 years later to today. Urban life has ensured that the number of cars have doubled on the streets. Nuclear families means that older siblings no longer take care of younger ones and have been replaced by house maids. Today's sophisticated and technological toys leave very little room for children to either move or be creative, only endlessly repeat what has been done before at the press of a button. Rag dolls made by an elderly aunt have been replaced by the Barbies. Play areas are sanitised, safe and devoid of imagination. The proverb, "Necessity is the mother of invention" holds well no more.

Most parents are busy working away from home to earn money to buy their children the best that money can buy. Another new trend among parents lately seems to be a rush to dispense with childhood, to reach its end as early as possible. There is a scramble among parents and even schools to enrol children into grade schools as early as 5 years or lesser in an effort to feel that their children

are very intelligent. Research shows that children enrolled early may show good strides in the first few years but are unable to cope with studies in higher classes due to the tremendous amount of information to be stored in a literally 'small brain' added with peer pressure and parental fears, finally burning out the child followed by tuitions and more mechanical and boring work. Where is the time to 'Play'?

Let's understand that children have their own pace and timescales unlike adults. When was the last time you paused to show your child an aeroplane in the sky, a ladybird in the bush or sat on the rock gazing at the stars? Says Sally Jenkinson in her book 'The Genius of Play'<sup>1</sup>, "Childhood is a state of grace, a big in-breath, a time for storing riches for the future. Have we lost our ability to empathise with children – to hear their voices, to enter their worlds? Can we protect them, yet also leave them free? Each child carries the knowledge of who he or she wants to become, and charts their course towards the secret future guided by the deep wisdom and light of the inner vision".

I would like to quote psychologist Dr. Stuart Brown, "Childhood Play, rather than being optional or extra-curricular, is central to an Individual's healthy development". The child who has played much during those early years is less prone to stress-related diseases as an adult, is more well-adjusted in her home or work environments or in marriage, and builds confidence and mental strength to handle crises situations in life. Play is as important to life as is sleeping and dreaming.

Therefore in Waldorf early childhood programs, "Play is Work and Work is Play" and the kindergarten is just an extension of the home. The classroom is an

<sup>1</sup>"The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood" by Sally Jenkinson. Hawthorn Press (First published in December 2001)



open space unlike other kindergarten environments that are full of furniture. Who are we to trap young ones from moving, (behind those desks and chairs), when all that nature wants of them is to move? Medical Science has proved today that the organs of a new-born are not yet fully formed and is in the process of developing. **Movement and Play** is so vital for the development of the body and the completion or solidification of the organs until the change of teeth. So two kinds of play, an indoor and an outdoor, that serves as a 'breathing out' in a beautiful rhythm set by the kindergarten teacher is alternated between acts of circle time, story-time and artistic or craft activity which are more a 'breathing in' process. This **rhythm**, that is consistently and diligently followed enhances life forces in the child and sets strong habits and builds rhythmical memory, which is a treasure of health for the whole lifetime of this developing human being. For instance, even clearing up after playtime becomes part of the daily rhythm setting the first lessons in **reverence** of objects that we use.

Dr. Rudolf Steiner<sup>2</sup> in his Spiritual Science refers to this as "To find the spirit in matter". So the 3Rs of a Steiner kindergarten then are, RHYTHM, REPETITION & REVERENCE. The teacher tries to, nay, lives through the 3Rs herself, so that children can follow her actions, gestures, thoughts and even vibrations in a deep unconscious process instilled in the activity of **imitation** in those first 7 years. Many conventional kindergartens have shifted from this natural imitative process of learning to a more head-oriented instructive process of teaching. Instruction and Teaching awakens the child's dream consciousness earlier than is appropriate leading to heaviness and burdensome in the child's will to learn purposefully in the later school years. The beauty of the environment, its consistent rhythm soaked in play, the opportunities for language building, the awakening of the powers of cognition through working with those nimble hands, and the whole joy of coming to school after leaving home at that tender age in a Steiner Kindergarten are unparalleled in any other systems in the world.



<sup>2</sup>[www.rsarchive.org](http://www.rsarchive.org) For a collection of the works, lectures given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner, the pioneer of Steiner-Waldorf education.

Photo courtesy: Smitha, Bangalore Steiner School

Manivannan is a Founding Trustee of Bangalore Steiner School, Founder Director of Kingdom of Childhood Pre-school and the Coordinator of the Steiner Education Seminar in Bangalore. He has also done the RCI (Rehabilitation Council of India) qualified course in special education and a three year course in the art of curative education and socio-therapy. As an educationist he is also a teacher trainer inspiring an inner attitude to work and helping teachers explore their creative best with children. His other interests include counselling, art & theatre and music. He can be contacted at [mani@heartnsoulfoundation.org](mailto:mani@heartnsoulfoundation.org)



# Early Childhood Intervention in rural Karnataka - parents are aspiring for quality early intervention. Can educational institutions deliver?

## The HLC story

Hippocampus Learning Centres (HLC) launched its 17 Kindergarten centres in 2011 to provide good quality affordable early childhood intervention to the underserved in rural Karnataka. In 2013, HLC reached out to 3000 children in 104 rural centres across the two districts of Mandya and Davangere.

The early childhood intervention constitutes a 3-year program targeting 2.5 to 6 year olds. The program has clearly defined learning outcomes that are developmentally appropriate. Domains of learning such as the cognitive, physical, socio-emotional and creative have been targeted for a well balanced approach to teaching-learning.

The children are all predominantly first generation learners. With both parents engaged in agriculture, the children spend 6 hours at out centres learning and enjoying themselves. Most of the children ask their parents to get them to the HLC centres even on Sundays.

The journey of successfully implementing this early intervention program has been an enormous learning experience for all involved at HLC. We have shattered many myths in the process.

The foremost one is the learning that parents are willing, rather eager, to invest in an early childhood intervention. At the onset, questions were raised if parents would want to invest in an early childhood program. What we learnt at HLC was that parents wanted an alternative to Anganwadis where their children could get access to the kind of education that would help build strong foundation for formal schooling. Many parents understood that their children would remain disadvantaged if they entered grade I without a formal early education intervention.



The other big learning as HLC evolved from a base of 17 teachers to about 180 teachers is that it is possible to source teachers from the local community, train them, deploy them and do this on a sustained basis. This way a woman from the community gets empowered and ensures quality learning for its children. This also increases community participation. Today, we witness parents enquiring about their children's learning, attending PTMs regularly and sharing notes on further learning for their children.

There are some successes that we at HLC are excited about. Our teachers no longer use terms such as "Manjunath is dull" or "Nirmala is weak in English". What they tell parents today is, "Manjunath is good at counting



but he needs more practice when it comes to writing numbers.” “Nirmala loves to listen to stories and answers questions based on the story, but she needs more help in identifying alphabets.” Child learning is assessed but in a friendly and a non-threatening environment.

The way in which our teachers in villages have been able to use phonics has been another pleasant outcome. Today the upper Kindergarten children at HLC centres read out – “c..a..ts..a..t on the m..a..t” stressing the sounds of the alphabet. The teachers as well as parents are thrilled at the manner in which the children have taken to reading simple sentences. It took us two years of deliberations and a small two month pilot to take a call on using phonics to teach children to read. The first challenge was the teachers themselves. The idea of phonics was completely alien to them. The training sessions where they practiced alphabet sounds were dominated by nervous giggles. In the classroom, the teachers were surprised by the pace at which children picked up the concept. There was no looking back. Today the teachers pride themselves in using the phonic method and talk about it to the parents too.



The stress on good hygiene at HLC centres has had a cascading effect. Parents come back and tell us that their son or daughter insists on everyone washing their hands after toilet. Some communities have reached out to us and made a case for building toilets if one does not exist in that village.

As expected in any endeavor, there are challenges that we have had to address on a continuous basis. In most villages (as even in cities), learning is synonymous with writing. Parents consider a written document as evidence of learning. This practice or malpractice of writing without understanding needs to be addressed not only at the ECE level but also at the primary levels across schools. At HLC we have attempted to address this through parent orientations at the beginning of an academic session. While this does have an impact, parents do come back with doubts when they see a child from a neighbouring ‘convent school’ writing A-Z in the very first month. There is a need for mass scale information campaign regarding unhealthy approaches to teaching-learning specifically in the early intervention years.

**Gayatri R.P.**  
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## Sesame Workshop India

Sesame Workshop India, the organization behind Galli Galli Sim Sim and more, uses the power of the media to help children reach their highest potential and prepare for school and life. They develop and distribute high quality and engaging content through television, radio, community radio, print, digital and outreach, to reach children aged 0-8. Their content aims to facilitate young Indian children's basic academic and life skills, while celebrating India's rich cultural diversity, in order to promote their overall cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. Galli Galli Sim Sim, the television series, has been watched by 10 million children each year since its debut in 2006 on national cable channels-Pogo and Cartoon Network and national public broadcaster-Doordarshan. Its educational messages are extended through a radio program aired on All-India Radio and community radio stations, extensive community outreach, and applications on new and emerging media such as cell phones and internet. Recently they have entered the school education space through the launch of Sesame Street Pre-schools whose curriculum and methodology integrates hands-on project-based learning, with creative approaches to foster critical thinking and problem solving, laying a strong foundation to promote lifelong learning.

For more details, visit  
<http://www.sesameworkshopindia.org/> or  
[www.galligallisimsim.com](http://www.galligallisimsim.com)



## Book Review by Prema Raghunath

### **Giving Kids A Fair Chance** edited by James J Heckman; Boston review Books; \$12.17 (hard cover)



This book which begins with an essay by the Nobel Prize winning economist brings out the point that the accident of birth is the greatest factor in social inequality. His essay is based on the premise that children who are born into socially, culturally or educationally disadvantaged families seem to exacerbate those disadvantages: by the time they begin school at the kindergarten level, the stage is already set for future problems such as dropping out, teenage pregnancy, crime and a lifetime of low wages and dead end jobs. Heckman points out that this is a serious setback for American society.

Heckman argues that current educational policies in the United States concentrate on improving cognitive abilities, but stresses the fact that success in life requires far more than that. Along with these abilities, children need opportunities to gain self-confidence and perseverance, qualities that bring out the best results in both professional and personal life. These qualities, according to Dr Heckman, are effortlessly imbibed by children lucky enough to be born in privileged families, who exhibit them at every step. Heckman therefore wants reforms and social policy changes for early childhood interventions which would ensure a more equitable distribution of opportunities to acquire these skills. He advocates a new focus on pre-school interventions which would result in improved environments for disadvantaged children, while at the same time bearing in mind the importance of family values and the cultural diversity of the US.

Heckman is primarily an economist and he looks at the situation through the lens of one who is as concerned with the cost it means to the US as with the other implication of it. He shows that the earlier affirmative action is taken, the greater is the beneficial social and economic impact right from reduced student-teacher ratios in early childhood schooling right up to adult literacy programmes. The financial crises following the 2008 debacle has resulted in cuts in educational spending: he argues that this is one area which should see a steady increase in investment for the best results for future society. Heckman issues a clear call for change in this short-sighted policy and offers some practical suggestions for designing and funding Early Childhood Education programmes.

Heckman's persuasive essay is followed by debate, in which other educationists examine one of the most fraught issues of our times - of inequality, of the role of schools, examining and closing social barriers, and investing public funds. The participants are Mike Ross, Geoffrey Canada, Charles Murray, Carol Dweck and Annette Lareau, whose essay is one of the most interesting and thought-provoking in the book. She disagrees with Professor Heckman and makes the point that too much privilege can be as harmful as too little or none at all. The role of social institutions, such as school, is to close the gaps that birth disadvantage and its sequelae bring about. Education, she argues, may shape a future but is not everything in life.

In their essay, Adam Swift and Harry Bridgehouse make the assertion that early childhood education favours majority behaviour while not taking seriously enough other cultures present in the mix, thereby leading to further disadvantage.

Other contributors' debates follow the trend of making diverse points: not everyone agrees with Dr Heckman in his assertions. They are diverse and balanced in their approach, indeed, at times much more so than Dr Heckman, whose arguments sometimes sound very simplistic. While it may be true to say that an advantaged birth almost always leads on to more advantaged positions, it is not equally true to assume that a disadvantaged start automatically relegates a child to an impoverished present and future. Today's society is replete with examples of children rising above their initial circumstances, braving the odds and ending up in positions of great respectability and honour and financial upward mobility.

More than Dr Heckman's initial essay, it is the contributors' rebuttal that makes this slim book interesting. Highly recommended for every library for the thoughtful opinions expressed, especially when we have so many inequalities in our own society which need to be addressed.

# Hands-on Science

## Comprehensive experiment kit for Middle and High school

The Hands-on Science kit, developed under the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), is a learning kit which can be used by an individual child, a group of 4-6 children or as a demonstration set by the teacher. The kit provides a facility to the children/schools in rural as well as urban areas to gain hands-on practical experience in sciences.

The kit has more than 125 items categorised and stored in 15 boxes.

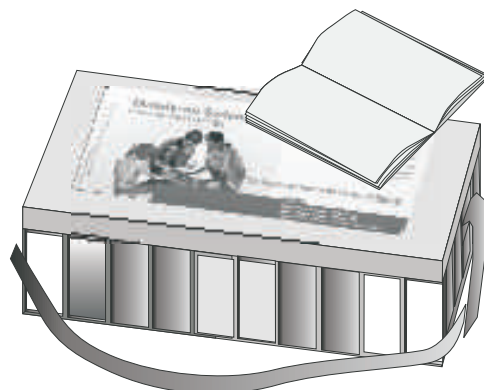
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- ▶ First aid box
- ▶ A set of Bal Vaigyanik workbooks for classes 6, 7 and 8 developed under HSTP (set of experiments covering basic sciences with a well evolved framework)

**Orientation:** Eklavya offers a session on how to use the kit for a group of 10-15 teachers and volunteers

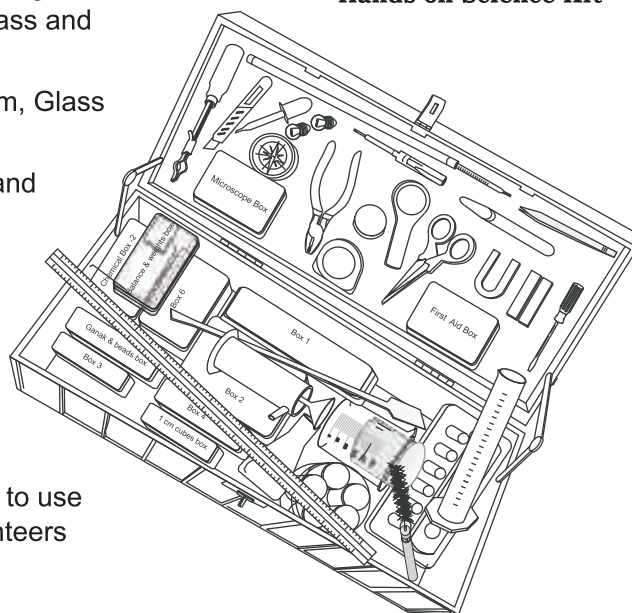
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