

They are Preschoolers, not Scholars!

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Abstract

The formative or preschool period is the most essential period to develop social, emotional and physical competencies. In recent years, with the development of a large number of preschools, the quantitative element might be met, but we are far off from the qualitative leap. School readiness is the most crucial aspect to preventing the increasing number of dropouts. While government initiatives are well in place, their implementation at the grassroots level has significantly failed reflecting a steep decline in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) while moving from the lower classes to the upper classes. This paper discusses the significant and often overlooked issues while considering pre-primary and primary education. It is also an effort towards identifying the problem areas and proposing a better approach towards imparting knowledge and enhancing learning outcomes. The paper concludes with a reflection on the need for trained teachers and better administration as the most important elements of a sustainable society.

INTRODUCTION

Carolina Abecedarian and Perry are two world-renowned preschool intervention projects in America. They provide high-quality pre-schooling interventions based on scientific and systematic procedures. The interesting thing is that both these projects were followed longitudinally for nearly

fifty years. The data derived from their longitudinal observation shows that learners who undergo their pre-schooling not only complete their schooling successfully but also get good jobs, have successful lives, and are less likely to commit crimes and become addicts. There is a substantial body of evidence for the positive impact

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of pre-schooling on IQ scores and long-term outcomes (Schweinhart, et al., 2005; Campbell, et al., 2002; Gray, Ramsey, and Klaus, 1982).

According to the MHRD's Unified District Information on School Education (U-DISE) data, India has 95.1 per cent Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level (grades I-V). When it comes to grades VI-VIII the GER falls to 90.7 per cent. Where do these children disappear? Government records call them 'dropouts'. Whether they themselves dropout or the system drops them out is an important issue to be discussed in detail, which is beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, students who continue school beyond grade 5 and above face a lot of difficulties. Further, everything is not fine with the retained students who continue schooling. Many such students struggle to cope with schooling and its 'rituals'. Research studies have found that those who dropout from schools at early stages lack the readiness to attend school. Children who are detached from their parents and family atmosphere at the age of five will find it difficult to follow the practices that are absolutely strange for them at school. School readiness helps children to get along with the school culture and adjust to the demands of the system. In India, lack of school readiness is an important problem that causes early dropouts at primary level. The Government of India has made substantial interventions to improve the curriculum, teacher

training, infrastructural and health care facilities at preschools (National Education Policy, 1986; National Curriculum Framework 2005; National ECCE Policy 2013; National ECCE Curriculum Framework 2013 and Quality Standards for ECCE 2013). The status of preschools remains grim in spite of all the initiatives from the government.

Understanding the critical nature of the issue, the new draft of the National Education Policy (NEP) underscores the importance of pre-primary education in enabling school readiness among children. However, the draft NEP guidelines for Preschool Education (2020), and Preschool Curriculum (2020) prepared by NCERT are oasis, in India's preschool education initiatives.

The importance of pre-schooling in developing essential social, emotional and physical competencies is undebatable. However, in India, parents and teachers expect children to pick up literacy, language ability, numerical skills all at pre-primary level. Unfortunately, the new draft national education policy also endorses this view. In fact, we treat our toddlers at preschools as receptacles to be filled with certain academic attributes. In other words the preschools invest time and energy to tame the children to 'school', their minds and actions in dovetailing them to the heavily loaded school years that follow.

The question is whether preschools are supposed to 'teach' our little children? Research studies

have shown that the preschool period (3–5 years) is critical as it is the far-reaching phase of brain growth. Decades of research show that a child depends upon a stable and secure relationship for healthy development. ‘Serve and return interaction’ is a basic condition for the healthy brain development of children at 3–5 years. Serve and return interaction needs a responsive atmosphere for the child where all his actions get a response, and at the same time, the child also gets an opportunity to respond. The child is dependent on the adult for many of their biological needs. The quality of response from the adult and opportunity will determine the brain development of the child. The absence of a fair and quality response from an adult would result in serious health problems for the child. In the words of Jack P. Shonkoff, who is a professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, a non-responsive environment and poor cognitive support from adults would lead a toddler to the “activation of the stress system, which may have biologically disruptive effects”. The need of the hour is for highly empathetic teachers and a conducive atmosphere to provide high quality ‘serve and return interaction’ in our preschools.

Institutionalisation at the age of three (at which pre-schooling starts) would be a developmental shock for the child. Unlike their home, they are introduced to an institutional system with certain rules and a code of conduct. This may curb their many

instinctual expressions, leading them to curb their responses, hushing them up for fear of the institutional response in the form of punishment, shame, etc. The capacity of student intake should be proportional to the availability of teachers. This enhances the opportunity to have a responsive relationship with teachers. Lack of individual attention from teachers, if coupled with less engagement and constructive interaction from adults at home, may have an adverse impact on the development of the child. One problem which is often overlooked is the child being away from the parents for a few hours, which, to the child, seems like a long time. With a pattern of staying home, they develop a habit of being with their parents, which when changed, brings about a negative mental impact, which may have future repercussions.

The institutionalisation of education is deeply rooted in global society. At this stage, it will not be proper to argue for a de-institutionalised preschool. Hence, the only option is to strengthen the preschool that supports the harmonious development of toddlers to the maximum possible extent. This makes pre-schooling the most important phase of the whole education system because of its impact on the future studies of students.

Do we have a robust pre-schooling system that can shoulder the responsibilities given? The field-based experiences give a very pessimistic

picture. Primary school principals and teachers delegate the duty of teaching literacy and foundational numeracy to preschool teachers. Primary school principals and teachers get the strong endorsement of parents as they want their wards to be smart children who speak and write English, and are able to count and write up to hundred or above. The most unfortunate fact is that preprimary teachers are not professionally trained to teach foundational literacy and numeracy. Preschool teachers are trained to provide emotional and physical support to children, which in turn supports their brain development. As preschools are under the administrative system of primary schools, they are left with no option other than being meek compliers. The benefit of this forced teaching-learning process goes to primary school teachers as they get 'learned' students, which reduces the struggle of teaching foundational numeracy and literacy in at least two languages.

Publishing agencies exert a major influence on what should be taught in a preschool. They offer a variety of books with loads of information and activities contained in them. In turn these textbooks become the syllabus and curriculum of preschoolers. Teachers become tools to transfer the wisdom supplied by publishing agencies. The pedagogy is left to the discretion of the teachers! The psychological and physiological support is often left to chance. The need of children to be with their

parents is no longer treated as a right in an era when pre-schooling has been institutionalised.

Anganwadis, nurseries and pre-primary schools are the major institutions engaged in pre-schooling. There are neither any minimum standards established nor any set of activities developed scientifically for these institutions. It is very sad to see that even the most literate and progressive state, Kerala, also projects a poor picture of unorganised pre-primary school system. Not even 5 per cent of the total teachers working in the pre-primary sector are appointed on a regular basis. Except for the regular teachers the rest of them get a variable salary, starting from ₹1500 per month. Preschool teachers training institutes also have a very unorganised system. Different types of institutions and different kinds of diplomas and certificates are prevalent, as no standards exist.

CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Women and Child Development had brought out a national Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy in the year 2013. According to the policy the duration of pre-schooling is 3–4 hours per day. The policy categorically states that the curriculum should be developmentally appropriate, child-centric and should be transacted through vernacular language or mother tongue. The new guidelines for preschool education published

by NCERT (2020), also is in line with the recommendations of the National Policy on ECCE (2013). Policies do not ensure practices. This requires sensible teachers and administrative system to ensure the basic rights of children. Opportunity for living in a joyful and responsible, supportive atmosphere should not be a generosity that we offer to our children, rather it is their right and of course an investment in a sustainable society.

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