

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

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 observed¹ 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. Preschool 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 preschool 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 preschool education can partially offset the disadvantages of early adversity. Longitudinal studies on The High Scope Perry Preschool 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 preschool 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 preschool 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 preschool enrolment of children from disadvantaged families might help to narrow the school readiness gap."

It was against this background that Akshara's preschool education programme was developed.

¹ ASER Reports (2007-2012), PISA Report (2012)

Akshara's Experience

Akshara began its **School Preparedness Programme** across 200 ICDS anganwadis in Bangalore in 2006-07 with the help of paid instructors who delivered a preschool component for two hours a day. In 2009 this programme was redesigned as the Preschool Education Programme by providing teaching-learning materials (TLMs) to support a developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum aligned to the curriculum implemented by the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), the spearhead of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which runs 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 preschool education.

Akshara has implemented its preschool programme : as an action-research project in non-notified slums in Bangalore; in independent balwadis being run by women entrepreneurs; and through a third worker model². However, the largest reach has been in anganwadi centres in collaboration with the WCD and is the focus of this paper.

Akshara's Preschool Education Programme

The main objective of Akshara's preschool education programme is to put a 'structured' preschool 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 preschool education. This was supported with a well-designed, research based preschool 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 preschool 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 preschool instructors are untrained and lack knowledge about the methodology of structured preschool 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

² For further reference visit www.akshara.org.in

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.

Preschool Education Programme in Anganwadis

Akshara implemented the preschool programme in all 1776 anganwadis in Bangalore Urban District from 2009 to 2012. During this period the learning outcomes of children were measured and tracked. All 1776 anganwadi workers were trained and around 18,000 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 evaluation³ 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 companion 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 preschool 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 preschool curriculum; the capacity of anganwadi workers who are expected to be preschool 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.

³ Access report on www.akshara.org.in

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