

Devika and Bala are two among the 33 million children between 3-6 years of age attending about 1.3 million Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) run by Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme of the Ministry of Women Development and Child Welfare to provide nutrition, health and early education services. The children learn through play and meaningful activities facilitated by the teacher. Most of the children attending AWCs come from disadvantaged families. Does the learning ability of these children depend on their socio-economic conditions? If they grow up failing to learn to read or write and dropout subsequently, is it due to their individual inadequacies influenced by factors such as poor habits, laziness or the lack of interest in education? Do poverty, caste, religion and other social differences account for their learning abilities?

Case 1

Background

Devika, a healthy child of 3 years, can only mumble words like 'Amma', and a few single syllable sounds and was considered as a non-verbal, unfortunate child. Her parents were worried about her linguistic inability and worshipped godmen and performed many rituals. They were frustrated and exhausted by the efforts that were not yielding any results. Then, the mother, who had lost all hope and was at the verge of giving up, attended 'Early Childhood Care and Education Day' (parent-teacher meeting). In that meeting, the teacher explained the importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and the opportunities children should get during the early years for proper development. The mother immediately admitted her into an AWC.

Intervention

Devika initially hesitated but soon started mingling with other children through the free play opportunities that the teacher created. The physical setup of the AWC piqued her curiosity to explore. She explored the play materials and pointing at objects kept mumbling words. The teacher supported her by pronouncing the names of things

that Devika was pointing to. The attention she got from other children of the same age also helped her to learn simple words. Slowly, she was able to form short sentences. Devika's mother ensured the regularity of the child to the centre. The teacher encouraged and made her part of all the activities in the classroom and provided multiple opportunities. This resulted in transforming an introverted and non-participative child into an active and happy child.

Reflection

Creating a fear-free learning environment in the centre enabled Devika to learn through joyful exploration. The teacher created opportunities for learning through conversation, storytelling, singing action songs and play activities, which enriched language development, enabling the child to learn through constant support. The mother played an important role in ensuring that the child was regular and spent time with the child at home reiterating the learning. In one of the parent-teacher meetings, Devika's mother shared her experiences with other parents, reinforcing the importance of early childhood education in the development of children.

Case 2

Background

Bala was 3 years old when he joined the AWC. He was very calm and sat silently in a corner of the centre while other children participated in the activities. He would not talk to anyone. Even if he was asked questions, he would not reply. Bala's parents are separated and he lives with his mother. Being a daily wage labourer, she could not spend much time with him. While his parents were together, almost every day, he witnessed his mother being harassed by his alcohol-addicted father. One day, his father locked Bala and Bala's elder sister in the bathroom and tried to set his mother on fire. Fortunately, his mother escaped, and his father was sent to jail. Since then, Bala stopped talking to anyone except his mother and his sister.

Intervention

The teacher kept talking to him and consciously

involving him by asking him to respond to the conversations, encouraging him to play with the toys. The AWC helper also started sitting with him and encouraged him to participate in the activities with other children. She also drew his attention to his personal hygiene as he was coming to the centre untidily. He started playing with the helper and slowly joined the other children. In a couple of months, he became a good participant in the play activities and active in art activities and in manipulating open-ended materials like blocks and straws.



Reflection

Constant attention, support and encouragement from the teacher and the helper enabled Bala to cope with his distress due to non-conducive home environment. Once Bala felt secure and comfortable to express himself, he started to participate in play and activities with other children. The confidence in the child subsequently created more opportunities for learning and development to happen.

Conclusion

Most of the children attending AWCs are first-generation school goers, whose lives are impeded by socio-cultural practices and financial constraints. Devika and Bala are representative of young children who prove that the learning ability of children does not depend on their socio-economic conditions. A caring and supportive teacher providing a joyful learning environment giving them equal opportunities can make a huge difference in their lives. Capable teachers who understand the connection between experiences and holistic development and are sensitive to the needs of each child are very important in executing a high-quality ECE program.

These teachers by creating a safe and clean environment and maintaining other curricular infrastructure, such as running blackboards, learning corners, circles for seating arrangement,

print-rich environment and so on, give learning opportunities to the children for their overall development within their limited financial constraints. They also create a harmonious relationship between the AWC, parents and community and reciprocal linkages among them to foster optimal development of a child. There is no one-fit approach to make children learn. Every child is unique and each learns in diverse ways, different times and at various places. The teacher needs to create a space which promotes thinking by allowing children to experience, experiment and question things around them and supporting them. Then, every child will learn.

Early Childhood Education Initiative

The Sangareddy Early Childhood Education Initiative focuses on capacity development of Anganwadi teachers to become reflective practitioners with the aim to transform AWCs into vibrant learning centres for the holistic development of 3- to 6-year old children. The intervention is within the existing systemic resources of the ICDS scheme. Teacher capacity development is at the heart of a quality early childhood programme and early learning opportunities available to children. Our experience suggests that such holistic ‘in-service capacity development model’ can effectively develop teachers’ competence to transact developmentally appropriate curriculum for children.

Teachers’ in-service capacity development is being carried out through a multi-pronged model for all teachers across the Sangareddy District of Telangana. Insights from our engagement through multiple platforms with the teachers, such as workshops, centre-level engagement, sector-level meetings, project meetings, ECCE days, *bala melas*, seminars, teacher *melas* and magazine, help the sharing and learning of good practices among peers. The experiential approach provides opportunities for hands-on experience to teachers through activities which teachers can do with children for enabling the development of critical life skills.

Factors enabling children’s learning within teacher’s circle of influence

Some important, basic elements of a good ECE programme that enable learning and development in the children attending AWCs and are within the teacher’s control are given here. Using this as a guideline, a teacher will be able to execute the programme effectively.

- Every day, the teacher provides hygienic and

nutritious food and ensures that the children wash their hands before and after food and a minimum of one hour of naptime after lunch.

- Every month, the teacher measures children's growth (height and weight).
- The teacher maintains a first aid kit at the centre and ensures a clean and safe environment in and around the centre.
- The teacher organises a stimulating learning environment as per a thematic timetable and

makes play material accessible to children.

- The teacher records and displays the children's work.
- The teacher treats children with care and uses positive methods of disciplining.
- The teacher encourages social interaction among children during play and mealtime.
- The teacher executes a minimum of three to four hours of ECE programme daily.



Key Teaching Practices leading to a good ECE Programme

Shailaja, a teacher in a small village, allows children free play in learning corners till the majority of the children arrive at the centre. She has arranged different corners in the classroom through which children get the opportunity to explore and experience on their own. Children interacting with each other, cooperating, sharing, working in groups, waiting for their turns etc. thus improving their social competencies. Along with free play, she also provides the opportunity for guided indoor play and outdoor play.

Once all children reach the centre, she makes them sit in a circle and takes the attendance by taking children's signatures on name charts pasted on the wall. Like this, she is able to integrate and provide literacy experiences through different activities. She starts with the conversation followed by story, song and pre-numeracy activities as part of the 'circle time'. As part of the circle time activities, she uses concrete objects and print material to enrich

the opportunities for listening, speaking and paying attention.

Children get access to storybooks in which they do picture reading, pretend reading and so on. Other practices like weather chart, rules chart, display board are enriching children opportunities towards functional print. She provides the opportunity to the children for identifying, understanding different emotions and connecting these with their daily life experience. One of her regular questions to children is, 'how are you feeling today?' Responding to this, each child picks an emotion card and tells the reason for their current emotion. Hands-on experience, thoughtful questions, playfulness, follow-up activities, appropriate demonstration of behaviours, free play sessions, balance between high- and low-intensity activities and free and guided activities are some of her approaches which are implicitly exhibited across all activities in a day.

Based on our experiences, a set of simple but key practices that a teacher should do in an AWC every day are mentioned below. These have a significant effect on children's development.

PRACTICE	DURATION
Provide opportunities for free and guided play indoor and outdoor.	60 mins
Facilitate meaningful interactions with/among children in circle time.	60 mins through the day
Use events of the daily routine to observe children's behaviours and guide their social skills.	Ongoing
Provide creative experiences to the children.	20 mins
Facilitate emergent literacy experiences to the children.	30 mins
Engage children in exploration and experimentation with objects to foster pre-numeracy skills.	30 mins



Factors leading to a good ECE programme

An effective, well-designed ECE programme is one delivered by trained and capable teachers, who understand the connection between experiences and holistic development, and are sensitive to the needs of the children. Here are the important factors:

Infrastructure

Young children need a physical environment that is spacious, welcoming and safe for their learning and development. Essential features of an early learning environment should include sufficient floor space, hygienic toilets, running blackboards, learning corners, seating circles, and so on. In addition, children need a plethora of visual, tactile and textual materials for learning and play, both indoor and outdoor.

Sunitha started working as a teacher 8 years back in a small, rented room where she did not have scope for conducting preschool activities. She tried to shift to other places, but people were not willing to rent space for an AWC. When she got to know that the primary school kitchen was not being used, she with the support of villagers, met the head teacher of the school to seek for approval to shift the AWC to the school premises. Few months passed by but there was no reply. The head teacher, meanwhile, was observing the efforts of Sunitha in providing better learning opportunities to the children in her centre. He also was able to see a clear difference in abilities of class I children in his school between the children who had been to

the AWC and those who had not. So, he offered another – better and unused – room in the school for the centre. Within a month Sunitha transformed the room into a vibrant learning

space with a print-rich environment for young children. Her strong desire to shift to a better place for children to do daily activities was fulfilled due to her sustained efforts.



Curriculum

A developmentally appropriate curriculum is necessary for the holistic growth of children. Hands-on experiences through interactive teaching, play-based exercises, outdoor activities and engagement with materials need to be included.

Balamani teacher is providing a range of opportunities for the development of children by using teaching-learning materials (TLMs). She has been using coloured cloth pieces, egg trays, paper glasses to enhance children pre-numeracy abilities such as matching, classification, making patterns. The attention span of children when involving in different activities with the variety of materials has increased which enabled the teacher to develop various concepts in a short period. She was, thus, not constrained by the unavailability of TLMs and created these herself using simple, no-cost and locally available materials to give a hands-on learning experience to the children.



Teachers

Most Anganwadi teachers work under difficult circumstances and strive to do a good job. Teachers are integral to the learning experience and they need our trust and support. A teacher's job needs to be recognised as being as complex as that of a school teacher. Professional qualifications are necessary for new teachers and the existing teachers need a continuing in-service programme for them to become better educators.

Prashanthi teacher runs the AWC in a village that has only houses made of thatched roofs. The best she could rent was a small room made of steel panels with a mud floor. Her interest to learn and develop her AWC made her participate in workshops conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation. She started understanding various components of pre-school education and started implementing her learnings. Within the existing space, she put mats on the floor and covered the sides with colourful print-rich pictures, arranged learning corners and started conducting activities with the children. In a few months, the change became visible to the parents and community members which resulted in an increase in the enrolment. Many teachers who work in similar constraints were inspired by her journey when she presented her story in a district-level seminar.

ecosystem. It is important to develop harmonious relationships and reciprocal linkages between the AWC, parents and community.

Anitha teacher observed that there were many children in the community who did not attend the AWC. She started inviting parents and community members to the monthly Early Childhood Care and Education Day (parent-teacher meeting) and demonstrated to them all the daily activities that take place in the AWC and the impact of these on a child's development. She also visited the homes of those who did not attend the meetings to explain the importance of pre-school education for their children. It took six months for her to bring a change in how the community viewed the AWC from a 'food serving place' to a 'vibrant learning centre where children develop their abilities'. This helped Anitha teacher in increasing enrolment from 25 to 40.

Family

The family needs to be recognised as an important part of a child's learning and development



References

Early Childhood Education Initiative Sangareddy. (2017). *Anganwadi Teachers Development Tracking*. Sangareddy. Azim Premji Foundation. Unpublished.

Early Childhood Education Initiative Sangareddy. (2018). *Anganwadi Teachers Capacity Development Model for Impactful Early Learning*. Sangareddy. Azim Premji Foundation. Unpublished.

Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2016). *Anganwadi Centres*, 2013. Delhi. Government of India.

*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.

ECE Team (Sangareddy). The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Initiative of the Azim Premji Foundation focuses on capacity development of teachers to become reflective practitioners with the aim to transform Anganwadi Centres into vibrant learning centres for the holistic development of children in the age group of 3-6 years.