



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

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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.

References

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