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

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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[1] 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

[1] 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[2] 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

[2]For further reference visit 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[3] 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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[3]Access report on www.akshara.org.in

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