



Primary School Education in India: An Overview

KEYWORDS

Primary Education, Children's Education, Quality of Education

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ABSTRACT

Various types of pre primary schools are available in India and more children are now attending pre-school indicating an increase in demand for education at this stage. This overall increase raises questions such as whether this demand has increased everywhere. Are all children attending pre-schools if they are available? Which types of preschools do children belonging to different socio-economic groups attend? Who are the children totally excluded from pre primary schooling? Drawing on quantitative data collected in the National Family Health Survey, DISE (District Information System for Education) and the Seventh All India Education Survey as well as qualitative data collected through CREATE's community and school survey in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh conducted in 2008, this policy brief presents an analysis of pre-primary education in India and recommends policies for the improved provision of equitable and quality pre primary schooling.

With this backdrop the present paper has been made an attempt to picturise the situation of primary school education in India.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-primary education is considered to be very important for the child as it is the first step towards entering the world of knowledge as well as a healthy and purposeful life. Pre-primary education helps children become more independent and confident as well as promoting the all round development of the children. Children who have been to pre-primary schools tend to learn more rapidly through an organized curriculum, learning aids and by interacting with other children. The main purpose of pre-primary education is to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal schooling and to prevent poor performance and early drop out. It also helps older children, particularly girls, to attend their schools making them free from responsibility of sibling care.

Thus it can be said that pre primary education is necessary for all children of 3-6 years old irrespective of their socio-economic background. With increasing numbers of nuclear families and a lack of family support, pre primary school education is gaining importance. Availability of quality pre primary education will promote inclusive education and meaningful access to school education by increasing enrolment and reducing the vulnerability of children to failure and drop out at later stages of education.

POLICY INITIATIVES FOR PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA

Provision of early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, is one of the six Education for All (EFA) goals. Although there is no numerical target for reaching the target group within a fixed time-frame, governments have been urged to expand access, improve quality and ensure equity in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services. Like elsewhere, the importance of pre-primary schooling has long been recognized by educational policy and programs in India and it has also been a constitutional commitment as a part of the directive principle of the constitution. The National policy on Education 1986 and its Plan of Action, have Placed immense importance on pre-school education. However, it has not been considered a fundamental right, nor it is being fully managed by the educational departments at national or state level although it is partially supported by the ongoing flagship edu-

cational program Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) which includes a major component of ECCE.

While the Ministry of Human Resource Development in India is responsible for elementary education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development deals with pre-primary education. The Government of India launched the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in 1975. The Department of Women and Child Development has been implementing the scheme which seeks to provide health care facilities, supplementary nutritional support and to improve children's communication and cognitive skills as a preparation for entry into primary school. Initially the program started as a project in some states but presently it covers many rural and tribal areas along with some urban pockets targeting mainly underprivileged children. The SSA envisages providing preschool education in convergence with the ICDS program.

PRESENT STATUS OF PRE PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

In India, preschool education is provided by private schools and government ICDS (Anganwadi) centres. In addition, there are some ECCE centers running under SSA and some preschools are attached to government as well as private schools.

According to the estimate given by the Seventh All India Education Survey (NCERT, 2005), there are 493,700 pre-primary institutions in India, out of which 456,994 are in rural areas. These schools serve 26.453 million children of which 12.829 million are girls according to DISE (District Information System for Education) data (2007- 08). The percentage of enrolment in primary schools with pre-primary facilities is low. It was 10percent in 2007-08 compared to 7.7percent in 2004-05. The highest percentage of pre-primary enrolment in primary schools is in Madhya Pradesh (19.6percent) and the lowest of 5.0percent in Bihar (Mehta, 2010). The third round (2005-06) of National Family Health Survey data (IIPS, 2007) shows that around 56percent of children in pre-school are enrolled in Anganwadis (ICDS Centres) for early childhood care and education. Among them only 31percent of children are attending the centres regularly. A large variation is also found in access to early childhood care and education across the states. Based on the research there are some recommenda-

tions have been made. They are as follows.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above discussion it is clear that there is a considerable variation in access to pre-primary education among children between 3 to 6 years old with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Children belonging to marginalized groups in society, particularly girls, depend on public preprimary schools, whereas those belonging to higher socio-economic groups are more likely to attending private schools. Since education of children between 3-6 years old is not a fundamental right, it is not legally mandated. Because of this pre-school education is suffering from inadequate coverage and poor quality benefiting very few children.

However, it is an important constitutional commitment as it is part of the Directive Principle and is also one of the EFA goals. It also as mentioned earlier has a significant positive effect on sustained meaningful access to education; so it should be given immediate attention in view of its important role in children's lives.

- The quality of teaching in public pre primary Anganwadi centres is unsatisfactory due to a lack of trained teachers. The government needs to invest in an improvement of quality of services in Anganwadi centres including pre-school education, which will improve the learning achievement of children at pre-primary stage.
- Provision of equitable access to all eligible children in the country requires expanding the coverage of the ICDS program by opening more pre-school centres or attaching such provision to existing government primary schools. Many states have already started these initiatives but the situation is far from satisfactory.
- To ensure the quality of preschool education it is important to provide well qualified and trained teachers for pre primary schools.
- More focus is needed for quality pre-primary education for disadvantaged groups living in poor and remote areas. The pre-primary education component of the ICDS program although evident on paper is often non-existent in reality.

- Facilities are important and must be safe, healthy and suitable environments for young children.
- Free food distributed in pre primary schools plays an important role in attracting the poorest sections of society to attend regularly and averting nutritional problems. These schemes should be maintained and expanded.
- The play materials in most of the AWCs visited are locked up in cupboards. This seems be a result of a fairly common belief that expensive and attractive things are too precious to be handled by children and need to be brought out for display only during inspections. The same is the case with library books in schools. Materials in pre primary schools should be made available to children to use, regularly inspected, updated and replaced.
- Different government departments need to implement pre-school education in a coordinated manner avoiding duplication and overlapping of interventions.
- The monitoring and evaluation of existing programs such as ICDS and ECCE is another important issue that needs to be carried out more frequently to supplement the inputs into these programs. This also plays a crucial role for better planning and policy implementation to ensure wide coverage of quality pre-primary education in the future.

CONCLUSION

Children who have been to pre-primary schools tend to learn more rapidly through an organized curriculum, learning aids and by interacting with other children. The main purpose of pre-primary education is to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal schooling and to prevent poor performance and early drop out. It also helps older children, particularly girls, to attend their schools making them free from responsibility of sibling care. Because, children are the future of India, hence they have to develop both in intellectually and socially. Then only the excellent educated India would be possible.

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