



PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT: AN INDIAN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

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Pre-school education (PSE) has become one of the most important strategies to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal learning as well as to prevent poor performance and early drop out in subsequent learning. It covers all forms of organized and center-based activities to foster the social, emotional and cognitive development of children. Pre-school education (PSE) is considered as one of the most important components of integrated child development services (ICDS) scheme in India. It helps children to perform in a better manner in primary education as well as in subsequent stages of learning. It also helps in the cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical development of children. This paper reviews some of the evidences of impact of pre-school education on the development of children.

KEY WORDS: Pre-school education, development, ICDS, India

INTRODUCTION

The first six years of a child's life is considered as the most critical years for his overall development, since brain development during these period is rapid. It lays the foundation for social, emotional, cognitive and psychological development of a child. It also helps to reduce the drop-out rates from primary education as well as subsequent learning. Studies proved that investment in early years of a child's life is the most cost effective than at later stages of learning (Nores and

Barnett, 2013). Pre-school education mainly consists of two aspects i.e. care and education. Care is a term which includes proper nutrition, medical attention with regard to immunization, safety, security and emotional support. The education programme includes non-formal pre-school education provided to children of 3-6 years age. Many parents now recognized the importance of pre-school education to give their children a better start to life. Pre-school education programs are not only desirable, but essential for parent (Jacinta, 2015). The pre-school years (3-6) of a child is the most critical

period as brain development during this period is rapid as well as to teach him/her how to love learning. In addition to that, children also learn how to communicate with others, how to express their feelings as well as how to develop their creative educational capabilities (Jacinta, 2015). The sustainable development goals conveys that by 2030 “every children within 3-6 years have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-school education so that they can ready for primary education” (UNESCO Report, 2019). Studies have found that investment in pre-school education is beneficial not only for children but also for building more efficient and effective education system (UNESCO, 2015, Nores and Barnett, 2013). It has also found that children who had attended pre-school education programme were able to acquire basic skills in counting, mathematics and speaking compared to the children who had not attended any type of pre-school programme (Jacinta, 2015). There is a strong evidence that high quality pre-school education has positive impact on children’s academic development and their emotional and cognitive development than any other phase of education (Whitebread et al, 2015). Universal early childhood education is a recent phenomenon. In past, the care taking activities of children were limited within the family, not only by the parents but by other family members. With industrialization and urbanization as well as increasing participation of mothers in work force, the necessity of pre-school education as well as child care centres are increasing rapidly. Now- a -days pre-school in India mainly consists of two components, such as early education and school readiness and child care (Ghosh and Dey, 2020).

The pre-school education in India is mainly provided by two agencies: public and private. Under public agency, pre-school education is provided by integrated child development services scheme (ICDS) which was introduced in 1975. It is one of the largest social welfare schemes of Ministry of women and child development, government of India. This scheme provides six services to the beneficiaries such as supplementary nutrition, regular health check-up, referral services, immunization, pre-school education and nutrition and health education. The target groups under ICDS includes children of 0-6 years, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating mothers. The services under ICDS are provided through anganwadis at the grass root level by anganwadi workers and anganwadi helpers. The pre-school education is one of the most important components of ICDS as it caters the needs of children of 3-6 years. It helps the child to develop up to his full potential as well as prepares him for formal primary education and subsequent learning. Alternatively, pre-school education is also provided by

private agency which is no doubt very much cost expensive. It has no regulation and control by the government, so the curriculum and education is wider in range. Due to lack of faith of parents on government pre-school education, the enrollment in private pre-school centres is rapidly increasing. Although the number of anganwadis has been continuously increasing in India, private pre-schools becoming very much popular among the parents and also expanding to rural rural and urban areas. This is because of the heterogeneity in the quality of services provided by different agencies (Kaul et al, 2015). Reviews of pre-school education state that it is important for overall development of young children before they enter into formal education. It has also strong bearing on the attendance of children when they enter into primary education. It is considered as the first step towards the world of knowledge as well as a healthy and purposeful life. The main purpose of pre-school education is to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal learning and to prevent poor performance and early drop out in subsequent learning (Paul, 2015).

HISTORY OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA

The concept of pre-school education/ early childhood education is a recently developed phenomenon. Throughout Indian history, educational facility was limited to male members of higher caste group. Illiteracy among children of lower caste group especially female children had an effect on unequal distribution of educational opportunity among the population (Pattnaik, 1996). An attempt was first made by Mahatma Gandhi in 1937 to educate children of all sections of the society. Maria Montessori’s visit to India in 1939 has laid to the foundation of pre-school education. Pre-school education has been a constant priority among the committees and commissions by the government of post- independence India (Pattnaik, 1996). In the National policy for children (1974), early childhood care and education has given much emphasis, the consequence of which is the initiation of ICDS in 1975. The National Policy on Education (1986 & 1992) considered early childhood care and education as one of the critical inputs for the overall development of children. It is considered as the feeder and support program for primary education and as the first step in the education ladder (Sheeranjan and Awathi, 2010). The convention on the right of the child (1989) advocated that it is the right of a child to have access to quality early childhood education. In another policy on Education for all (1990), it was declared that ECCE is the foundation for higher learning as learning begins from birth. The National Nutrition Policy (1993)

suggested for Govt. intervention in care, development of education during early years. In Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and Moscow Framework for Action (2010), it is declared that ECCE should be given the highest priority and much emphasis should be given to the quality aspect. In the amended article 45 (2002), it is stated that the state shall provide free and compulsory ECCE to all children until they complete the age of six years. The National health policy (2002), The National Plan of Action for Children (2005) and National Curriculum Framework (2005) realized the supportive role of ECCE in the improvement of future enrollment, reduction in dropout rates among children and also improvement in test scores of children in higher education. Thus, these three policies supported the intervention of government for the healthy provision of early education. The Right of Children for Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) mentioned that free and compulsory education would be provided to children from 6-14 years. But in its 11th section, it has included early education in order to prepare a child for elementary education, the corresponding state Government should provide free early education for the period of 3-6 years. From 1st five-year plan to 10th five-year plan, various major policies have been taken for strengthening all the components of ICDS. In 11th and 12th five-year plans, funds were disbursed for the improvement of early education.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

As per Oxford dictionary, human capital is defined as, “the skills the labour force possesses and is regarded as a resource or an asset”. According to Goldin (2014), “human capital is the stock of productive skills, talent, health and expertise of the labour force as physical capital is the stock of plants, machine, equipment and tools.” There are investment in people in terms of education, training and health and these investments can increase individual’s productivity (Goldin, 2014).

Before introduction of the human capital theory by Gary Becker, education was considered as a consumption good, basically consumed by middle and upper class people to signal their social distinction. According to human capital theory, education is considered as an investment good. Individual must invest in human capital i.e. schooling and training to become more productive and this higher productiveness will result him fetching higher wages in future (Machin, 2008). Pre-school education has a positive impact on economic development by allowing more parents to enter into paid labour force and raising their productivity (MacEwan, 2013). It has also found that

investment in early years of disadvantaged children promotes equity and economic efficiency (MacEwan, 2013). According to Meier (1999), education is the most important factor that determines economic growth and distribution of income. There are mainly three reasons for government intervention in education such as poverty trap, internalizing positive externality and to avoid information asymmetry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section basically studies the existing literature available on the impact of pre-school education on school going children. Pre-school education has both short term and long term impact on children. Sunderlal (1981) has pointed out that enrolment in pre-school education helps in enrolment in higher learning. It has been reported that children attending Anganwadi centers have been more developed than non-ICDS children in motor skills, language skills and psycho-social behavior.

Anuradha and Komala (2003) has reported that infrastructure facilities used in implementing the non-formal pre-school education have a positive influence on the all-round development of the beneficiaries. Arora et al. (2007) have found that cognitive abilities are increasing with the increase in the age of children and the cognitive abilities of ICDS children are growing faster than non-ICDS children. According to Barnett (2008) the gains from ECCE investment are educational success, economic productivity and decreasing cost to govt. U.S. President’s Report (2014) demonstrated that the benefits are not only limited to children and parents but also to society and overall development for the nation. Hazarika and Vijaya (2013) have concluded that children of 7-10 years old, 11-14 years old and 15-18 years old have more chance to be enrolled in school if they have attended any early childhood development program when they were 3-years old.

Education, which shapes the behavior of a child has much more influence on the way of living of the people. It determines the quality of life of our population. The growth and development of a nation directly or indirectly depend on the level of educational attainment of its population. In addition to primary education, secondary education and higher education, government should focus more on early childhood education. The period of 3-6 years is regarded as the critical period of a child as brain development during this period is very rapid. According to Nores and Barnett (2013), there are some benefits to children from early childhood education which can be explained by educational success, economic productivity and decreased cost to government. Early childhood education helps in achieving high test score, reduces

the need for special education, reducing grade repetition and also reduction of dropout rates among students of primary education. According to them, this program helps in improving the enrollment in subsequent learning and also reducing in behavioral problems, delinquency and crime. The indirect impact of early childhood education is that it helps in increase in employment, earnings and welfare of the nation. It also helps in reducing smoking and drugs use habits among the children and lower depression among them. This program helps the government in reducing the special education cost, social service cost, crime cost and health care cost. According to them, ECE can be a strong public investment as it increases the educational achievement and attainment, decreases the educational inequality among the rich and poor section of the society and helps in increasing job, earnings and as a whole the GDP growth of a country. According to MacEwan (2013), children rapidly develop foundational capabilities in the early childhood years which builds subsequent development in future. In addition to their cognitive and linguistic development, they also gain dramatic progress in their emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities.

The experience of children in their early years has a very important role in their cognitive and social development. It not only affects children's personal wellbeing but also benefits the whole society. Therefore investment in early childhood education is an essential component of human development. The public investment in early childhood education also helps those children with low socio-economic status and also reduces the educational inequality among the people of different income groups by providing high quality early childhood education to the children of low-income group people. In this way, it reduces the opportunity gap among the income groups.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: COGNITIVE, BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAINS

The gains from early childhood education may be cognitive, social or economic. The returns from early childhood education are higher both for the participant and the government. It has experienced that the returns from early childhood education exceed the expenditure incurred on it. Thus it does not have any adverse impact on the government budget and benefits to children, individual, their families and society at a whole. Economic gains can also be measured by the individual earning which they will get in future. Higher earning leads to higher tax payment to the government and simultaneously greater contribution towards the development of the nation. It has also impact on the fiscal savings for the government, like lower grade

retention and less need for spending on special education and improvement in subsequent school and college enrollment (MacEwan, 2013). Along with the long-term benefits, there are also short-term benefits of early childhood education programs. As children are engaged in high quality early childhood care, their parents can participate in labor force. This will lead to the expansion of national income and output. The productivity of parents will increase when their children are in high-quality early childhood program. When parents are aware that their children are in high-quality child care program, they will be less frequently absent from work. Again with the knowledge about high-quality child care program, parents will be under less stress and will be more productive and concentrate their work in a better manner. They will be more satisfied with the job as they take less frequently leave from their job and will not face any conflict between their jobs and the wellbeing of their children. It has pointed out that early childhood education has its impact on children, parents and society. Immediately it increases the employment and productivity of the parents. And in the later stage of life, it helps in higher educational attainment which helps them to earn their livelihood. It has been examined that early childhood education reduces the achievement gaps among the black-white people of U.S.A. in long-term and also increase the long-term earnings in adulthood. The high quality, affordable early childhood education helps the parents in balancing the work and take proper family responsibilities. It has found that early childhood education lowers the involvement with criminal justice system. Improvement in cognitive and socio-emotional development leads to reduction with involvement in criminal justice system, lowers the crimes, and benefits the society from increased safety and security.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

India has more than one billion people, out of which 350 million are between 0-18 years and more than 158 million children are in the age group of 0-6 years (Census 2011). This number is more than three times the population of U.K. and more than 2/3rd of the population of U.S.A. Thus to meet their basic educational needs, proper care should be taken by investing more amount on early childhood care and education, providing adequate teaching staffs, adequate infrastructural facilities, adequate teaching learning materials and playing kits. The education provided to them through early childhood centers should be informal, Play based and joyful and teaching of 3 R's should be prohibited. India has been implementing the World's largest ECCE program known as Integrated Child Development Program since 1975. It was initially

launched in 33 developmental projects and now has expanded to 7075 developmental blocks.

The period of 3-6 years is regarded as the critical period for a child as brain development during this period is rapid. Research on psychology, cognition and neuroscience states that investment on children during this stage is most cost effective than investment in that later stage of life. It is basically targeted to children of deprived or lower socio-economic group. Early childhood education helps in improvement of the physical, social, cognitive, and psychological abilities of the child during this period. It also prepares children for future learning. The academic success rate of children who had attended early childhood education is higher than those who did not attend any early childhood development program. Early childhood attendance helps in improving attendance of children in subsequent learning and also improves their learning performance. Many studies have done on the impact evaluation of this program and have found that this program helps in reducing the early achievement gaps among children from richer and poorer section. Some studies have reported investment during this period is cost effective and returns are higher as it is one type of preventive measure. The benefits of early investment are larger and long lasting. Carneiro & Heckman (2003), in one of their paper have shown the evidence on the rate of return to investment at different stages of life cycle by using a downward sloping curve. They have shown that there is a higher return on investment during the younger stage of life and they have viewed that early investment increases the productivity at later stage. Research from different countries has found that investment in early childhood programs has both short-term and long-term benefits. In short run, high quality and persistent early childhood program helps the elder siblings to attend school education as sibling care is no more required. It also helps in increasing the employment opportunities for mothers. The chances of children who had attended pre-primary education are more to attend the primary education and subsequent learning than children who did not attend any pre-school education. A research finding has shown about the adverse effect of early childhood education that the separation of child from her mother does not have a good impact on the cognitive development of the child. But this is not a big issue at all as the child spends this time in pre-primary centers in a better manner which helps him for his overall development.

A study by Barnett (2008) supports early childhood education by investment on human capital. One more short-term impact of early childhood care and education is that it ensures equity in the access of ECCE as it targets mainly children from deprived section. There are so many long-term benefits from early childhood education like it helps in attaining

overall development of children. It makes the child more productive so that he can earn more income in future and helps in promoting economic development. Some studies have reported that it helps in reducing inequality among the people in the long run.

Well-designed pre-school education helps in reducing grade repetition, higher educational attainment and achievements of test scores and also helps in reducing dropout rates in subsequent learning. It helps in improving child's development potential before they were entering into primary school. United Nation concerned pre-school program as one of the means for improving school readiness. The expansion of early childhood care and education is one of the six Education for all goals adopted in the World Education Forum, 2000. The priority given to early childhood care and education is based on the claim that foundation for learning begins in the earliest years of life (UNESCO, 2007). The members of OECD countries concerned about the early childhood education programs after the program for International Students Association had reported the link between educational attainment and social background of children. Many studies found that pre-school education provides equal opportunities to children from the different socio-economic background. Studies have pointed out that early childhood education program was launched to counter attack inequalities among different children in skills and competencies when they enter into school.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION: SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Sachar et al (1996) have stated that children who have attended pre-school education had a better mental status than those who had not attended any pre-school education irrespective of age, sex, parental education level and socio-economic status. It has been recommended that in a country like India with mass illiteracy and poverty ridden parents, the non-formal pre-school education can prove to be a highly cost-effective measure to improve mental status of children. Some studies have described the importance of pre-school education to improve long-term academic performance of children. This program prepares children to join primary school by enabling them to learn some basic mathematics, speaking and interacting with friends which was not the case for their counterpart (Berlinski et al, 2006 and Jacinta, 2015).The pre-school education programme have positive effect on children's learning and development but it widely varies by types of programme. It produce long-term improvement in school success like higher achievement score, lower rate of grade repetition and less expenditure on special education etc. It also helps to reduce crime rate in childhood and adulthood

(Barnett and Ackerman, 2006, Barnett, 2008). Children from disadvantaged section get the most benefit from pre-school education. Nores and Barnett (2013) have shown the potential gains from pre-school education. Broadly benefits from pre-school education can be classified as impact on educational success and economic productivity and decrease cost to government. Children attending pre-school education have educational success in terms of achievement test scores, reduce cost to government for special education and grade repetition, less behavioural problem, delinquency and crime, high chance of employment, earnings, less chance of smoking, drug use and depression. Impact on decreased cost to government includes schooling cost, social service cost, crime cost and health care cost. Moreover, the gains from pre-school education includes increased educational achievement and attainment and decrease social and educational inequality and fewer social problem which will lead to increase in employment and economic productivity.

CONCLUSION

Pre-school education is gaining importance universally for its role in preparing a child to the world of knowledge. The period of early years (3-6 years) is considered as the most critical period of a child's life as brain development during this period is rapid. A large numbers of children in India do not get the chance to enroll in any of the child care programme, which can lead to developmental delays and deficit in life. The main aim of pre-school education is to make overall development of young children and to pre-prepare them for school readiness. Studies have found that investment in pre-school education is beneficial not only for the children but also for building more efficient and effective education system (UNESCO, 2015, Nores and Barnett, 2013). It has also found that children who had attended pre-school education programme were able to acquire basic skills in counting, mathematics and speaking compared to the children who had not attended any type of pre-school programme. This paper reviews some of the evidences of impact of pre-school education on the overall development of children. Pre-school education has positive impact on behavioural skills, cognitive skills and educational achievements in subsequent classes. Moreover, these behavioural skills help a child to achieve subsequent skills for future success in life (Heckman et al, 2006). This paper suggests that expanding pre-school education is an important instrument to improve long-term academic performance.

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