



The Importance of Early Childhood Education

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The only unregulated area in education in India at this point is Early Childhood Education. There are a number of rules for school education, now even a law for universal school education, numerous legislations, policy structures and frameworks. However, there really isn't anything like this for early childhood education. We do have a government pre-school system through the Anganwadis in rural areas. But there is absolutely zero regulation in the private space. So I can decide to start a pre-school in my home today and no one will ask me any questions - what curriculum/board is to be followed, children of what age are to be admitted, is it legal to take in children when they are 18 months old or should they be taken in only at 3 years, minimum safety standards to be followed, training that one is to have undergone, etc. So it is an absolutely 'free-for-all' space. Therefore, there is a huge mushrooming of all kinds of private centres for early childhood care and education, especially in the urban space – day-care centres, crèches, pre-schools. There are no rules for setting up and running any of these. Therefore, there is a huge area of concern here, because it has an impact on safety of children, their learning, their growth and their development. The early childhood years are one of the most critical in a child's development.

While this is the scenario in urban areas, rural areas have the regulated space of government anganwadis. The overall idea, and in most states, the curricular guidelines and standards that have been set-up for nutrition, etc. are quite commendable. However, implementation is fairly poor for a variety of reasons. So we have both the urban - semi-urban - rural unregulated private space versus the regulated government space which is in a fairly sorry shape. Tamil Nadu apparently is doing very well in its ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) program, but 'very well' seems only relative to what may be happening in most other

parts of the country. Whether the private space, though unregulated is doing some good service, we have no idea. There has been very little research or studies done at a scale to be able to tell us what is actually happening. There is an entire range from the next-door neighbour running a pre-school in her extra room or garage or garden to the very high-end sophisticated pre-school systems which look very good but are unaffordable for most people. This is an enormous space, without common principles, and therefore there is nothing as a single entity called the 'private space'.

Another important dimension is that we have a large number of children coming into government schools in Class 1 with no previous understanding or experience of a structured learning environment. Many, many children are walking into Class 1 as their first experience of school, after spending the first five-and-a-half to six years of their lives at home, or some of it at a dysfunctional Anganwadi, or just managing somehow. So we have a lot of children for whom the first six years are fairly loose, with no real thinking of what is happening, given the fact that in most of those situations both parents are working, the family support system sometimes exists and sometimes doesn't, and there are nutritional as well as health and safety issues attached. This is not what is happening everywhere, but it is sort of the large picture of what is happening in the first six years of the child's life in this country.

The urban migrant space is another space where you have young children who are moving with their families from, say, one construction site to another. What happens to them? They mostly live in fairly unhygienic, unsafe environments. Builders are required to run a crèche, depending on the size of the project, etc. Many of them don't. This again is a very loosely regulated space. Given the levels of pollution, safety, equipment around, lack of supervision, lack of hygiene, lack of nutrition, it is



indeed an extremely difficult situation for these children. Added to it is that they are away from the comfort zone of their own homes, having migrated from their villages. They are cut off from their larger extended families and community in the villages and live in small nuclear families here, often in places where the language is very different from their own.

We are also in the middle of a change in the whole family structure, which affects semi-urban and urban families more. Less and less families have grandparents at home, aunts and uncles, and other children. Earlier, you would be one among about ten children; a grandmother telling you a story regularly, someone playing with you all the time, and access to the kitchen which is a wonderful place full of all kinds of things, access to the garden, access to animals – lot of things going on around that is a very conducive environment for children to learn. Since there would be a lot of adults – and all kinds of them – the child would experience a lot of language. The child would have all kinds of these opportunities, which were not necessarily structured, to learn and grow. Slowly, one or two child families came in and there was less and less of these kinds of interactions, which is making it more difficult for the child to understand the idea of sharing, the idea of learning to live with each other, learning language itself, picking up reasoning, etc. For example, you will notice that in houses with two or three children, the younger one often learns things faster. It is not that the younger is more intelligent or the older is less bright. It is just about the opportunity – when the younger one is at a stage when her brain is sharp and like a sponge, she has the opportunity of having an older child around her who is already learning a lot of things.

Research says that the first six years are extremely critical to a child's development – cognitive development, emotional development, general health, development of dispositions towards learning, disposition towards others, etc. These may sound like big things for babies, but are actually very important, because they set a lot of tones and expectations. The way children learn language in the first six years of their life, I feel they never learn it with that kind of ease ever again. If one looks at brain development, the kind of neural connections that are being formed in the first twelve years, and certainly in the first six, are never repeated. The

number of neural connections formed is really the amount you learn – this may not be a technical way of putting it, but a simplistic way of understanding it. It is the varied experiences that children get and repetition of experiences which helps a child learn much faster, and by this we do not mean learn before one's time or age. It just means being able to see things, develop concepts, understand dynamics of what is going on around, see connections, see relationships – all these begin very early. Language plays a big part in this, because language and cognition are very closely linked. Language is the way we construct the world for ourselves as well as for others. Learning language begins very early in life. Therefore, even when they are very young, talking a lot to children, explaining to them, discussing with them helps tremendously in the development of their language skills. Children may not have begun speaking, and language does not necessarily mean speaking. Language, first and foremost, is the way one thinks and children are constantly thinking. Speaking, reading, and writing, come later on.

What would make a difference would be a child (say, 2-3 years old) growing in a home which values the written word and therefore sits with her mother, father, grandmother, older sibling and everyday spends a couple of hours turning the pages of a book, listening to a story, understanding the connect between the story and the written word, understanding that there in the written word is a world of magic; this child by the time she is five or six, the kind of language she has developed will make her understanding and grasp of more advanced concepts that she has to learn in school much easier, because she has already gotten the base. Secondly, she has developed a love for learning because there have been positive experiences around learning and those positive experiences have become embedded in the architecture of the brain - good emotions, happy circumstances, something exciting to do all form a network of understanding in her mind. Now, let us consider another situation – a home where there is poverty of this kind of resource, and that kind of a home need not necessarily have to be a rich or a poor home, since this has nothing to do with money. While money does help you access resources, and children coming from difficult socio economic circumstances struggle a lot, there are homes which



have resources but the culture of learning, the love for reading, access to books, and the excitement around reading and writing is missing. So the child comes, at age six, into class 1, without that and therefore it takes a little time for that child to be able to make those kinds of connections, to be able to figure out various kinds of relationships, to understand a lot of concepts – so this child comes in a little handicapped in that sense.

The idea of pre-school is really to provide these opportunities - to encourage sensory exploration, cognitive exploration, emotional bonding, learning to play with each other, learning to think about another human being, about objects, to understand colour, the joy of reading. Many things like this are introduced at that time and connected with happy and good experiences. This forms a permanent bond. And if this can be done in an atmosphere of emotional safety, an atmosphere where a child is a child and she is accepted the way she is, encouraged, praised, loved, cared for, her needs understood, then the entire experience forms something positive in the child's mind which lives forever. The converse is also true. Children with very difficult experiences in early childhoods – experiences of deprivation, of violence of all kinds, experiences with adults that have taught them very early on to be scared of power, developed in them a fear of the adult, of authority, of the person in control – these are also messages that go home very quickly.

It is not just enough to say that children must have positive learning-stimulating experiences in childhood; it really depends on what exactly those experiences are. So, I would say that it is better to keep the child in a happy home rather than sending her to a lousy play school. Even with parents or grandparents who don't quite know what exactly to do with the child, it is much less damaging than sending the child to a pre-school where there is structure and there is learning, but there is either learning beyond their age or learning out of fear and force. The whole idea is to create experiences of joy at this age and generate excitement. Children are already asking questions, they are already curious, they are already excited by many things, even those looked at by adults as very ordinary, it's a whole new world for children, filled with excitement and interest – that is what one has to keep alive. The very idea of language, - where everything has a name, a

system where you can call something by some name and some other thing by another name – the idea of colour, the kinds of shades you have of colour; the world is actually an exciting place, especially to someone who is just entering it. So the idea is that we give our children this kind of experiences, which are cognitively stimulating and emotionally safe. If this is possible, it is what sets the stage for both a positive attitude towards learning as well as eases the child into her school.

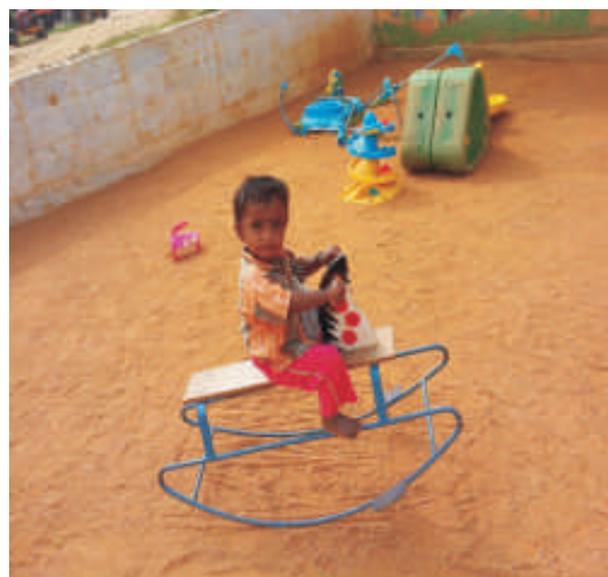
Nutrition plays a very, very critical role. And in our country this is a huge thing, because most of our children enter class 1, aged six, nutritionally deficient in the most critical components (vitamin B-complex, minerals, etc.), many of them anaemic, especially our girls. All the vital nutrients have a huge role to play in cognitive ability. There is a strong correlation between nutritional deficiency and cognitive ability. So most of our children walk into class 1 already three steps behind, which is why in the Aanganwadi system, the nutritional aspect is a big piece – one which we definitely cannot ignore in our country. The reason for the mid-day meals was precisely that. One, it was to increase attendance, etc. but also simply because food, the functioning of the brain and learning have a direct correlation. If you look at the Scandinavian countries, Finland for example, they are some of the richest countries in the world, but they all have a lunch program in their schools. It is not because children cannot afford to get lunch or that they are from homes that are nutritionally problematic, but because they see it as very basic and an essential part of education. It has nothing to do with being rich or poor, but rather has to do with the fact that nutrition and learning have a very close connect with each other. Nutrition is connected not only to your body, but connected to the way your brain works. Anaemia, for instance, has an impact on memory – a very critical part of learning. So in pre-school, the issues are around brain development and therefore the kind of stimulating environment we give a child, the kind of relationships we help the child to build, the kind of physical nutrition we provide and physical movement we give space for. This is why we moved to the idea of an organised, structured pre-school environment. Otherwise, families where these are available are good enough. I feel, and many may disagree, that if one has a home that provides all this, there is actually nothing like it. It does not

necessarily have to be a formal school. The only thing is that sending a child to pre-school does get her used to the structured environment that she will meet at age six, once she gets into regular school. But it really doesn't take very long for basically well-adjusted children to adjust into a new environment, they learn it quite quickly.

In spite of the early childhood stage being so critical to a child's overall development, we somehow don't seem to have given it the importance it is due. While higher education is being given a lot of attention, the very start of one's life is sort of being left to chance. Pre-school education does not come under the Ministry of Education. It belongs to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD). At the Centre it is called Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, but in the State governments it is under WCD. The entire Anganwadi system comes under the purview of this. Even if there is an Anganwadi in the same compound as a primary school, the two don't interact with each other, at a system level. There is no link between what a child learns in the Anganwadi and what she will learn in class 1 at school. There is no conversation between the primary school and the Anganwadi. So systemically, there is zero connect between the Anganwadi system and the primary school system. ECE is not being seen as one, part of a continuum in a child's education and two, as critical to a child's overall education.

Early childhood is still being seen more only from a health and medical angle, i.e., the focus is more on safe birth, immunisation, etc. We have still not understood, as a system and as part of society in general, the connection between various stimuli in the early childhood years that make future life so much more empowering, for instance, even as parents, we do not understand how critical many of our actions are and what kind of impact it can have in the early years. This doesn't mean that one has to turn into a very unnatural and structured parent, but one needs to be aware that whatever is done has an impact on the child who lives in your home, who is absorbing so many things and to whom you (as a parent) are the most important person in the child's life. For the child, her whole world revolves around you, and therefore what you do becomes absolutely critical. So the child goes through all experiences along with you. So as parents, we don't quite take our own roles as seriously as we should.

Also, at a systemic level we have not given enough thought to what kind of experiences the child will go through in the five to six years before getting into school and the kind of impact it has. It also stems from our overall understanding - or the lack of it - of children, of learning, of growing, of what education is supposed to do. For instance, I have a child in my neighbour's house who is two-and-a-half and his mother expressed her concern that she has not yet put him to a pre-school when everyone around seems to have already put their children into one at the age of two itself and have begun learning to write. The child is very active, plays with a lot of children in the apartment complex in the evening and is with his grandmother the entire morning where she keeps him fully entertained. I don't see a missing piece yet. So the mother's concern about him joining a pre-school is more out of a pressure from seeing what everyone around is doing, not from what the child actually requires. The basic frame of operation itself seems to be worry and fear. It is fair to expect that the child should meet other children, interact with them, learn to share, etc. but to expect him to start writing at three is absolutely unnecessary. If one looks at the fine motor development of a child, it is actually the last piece that happens, at almost age five plus. So being able to easily tie shoelaces, put on all kinds of buttons and write are things that a child starts to do only at almost age six. And today, many pre-schools make children write at two-and-a-half, when the muscles are still completely unready. This is actually quite detrimental to development and can cause damage to a lot of kids, not only physically, but more





important, mentally. It straightaway sends an unpleasant experience message. Forgetting completely for a moment about the emotion or ethics behind it, and looking only at the neurology, the neural connection is being formed between the action of writing and the sadness felt by the child by doing that action. The message that remains with the child is, "Writing is a terrible activity; I will be slow at it; I will get yelled at for it; My hand hurts". We have already turned the activity into a punishment for the child. There are ways of doing it. If children naturally start writing early, let them do

it, but let them decide and write the way they want to. It need not be corrected or hand-writing fine-tuned at that stage. It can be corrected later, at age six, when the child has more control. Nothing is lost by doing it a little later. Flexibility in pace of learning doesn't mean that learning does not happen. If a child goes through positive, exciting, mentally challenging experiences, she will succeed, because she is capable of learning and is at her sharpest. It is us who destroy that. We create circumstances by which children stop asking questions by the time they are eight or ten years old!



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