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A Study of Academic Readiness of Preschool Children

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The present paper is based on a comparative study of the academic readiness of two groups of children of Class I – one exposed to the normal preschool programme and another exposed to early reading, writing and arithmetic experiences. The study was carried out to find out whether a preschool experience stressing early reading, writing and arithmetic would help children in early literacy and numeracy skills in Class I.

The crucial importance of preschool and the need for preparing children, before they enter Class I and exposing them to a programme of preschool learning, is now universally recognised. The early childhood years especially 4 to 5 years age group in a preschool enable a child to think, to listen and to judge for themselves. Normally the teachers of Class I feel that a child with preschool experiences adjusts easily to the demands of Class I. The question here is whether the education that children get in the preschools is appropriate to their stage

of development and needs, so as to lay a firm foundation for the future years. The preschool programme can and should bridge the gap that the child faces between her preschool years and her beginning of the primary school.

The preschool beginner faces many new problems in Class I in spite of having enriched early childhood experiences. Entering Class I requires new adjustments for all children, even for those who have attended preschool. The degree of child's confidence, excitement, pride, anxiety, anticipation and perspective at the door of the Class I is determined by the experiences that his preschool environment provides for him prior to Class I entrance. Thus adjustment to Class I play an important role in building up the life of the child.

Adult demands and expectations in Class I are different from the experiences child has had in the preschool. There are rules and regulations at school, that are set for the whole school and, therefore, do not

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make sense to young children. Schools also demand authority and the school beginners who are not ready to face this new authoritarian situation feel insecure, inadequate and left out. The discontinuity prevailing between pre-primary and primary school may be a frustrating experience for a newcomer who enters Class I with lot of enthusiasm.

The *Report of the Education Commission (1964-66)*, Ministry of Education, Government of India indicated the problem of wastage and stagnation in India in first two decades. It reported that about two thirds of this wastage occurred in Class I. The report stated that the large stagnation and wastage in Class I is due to various reasons which include:

- the heterogeneity of the age composition of students ;
- the practice, which obtains in several states, of making fresh admissions throughout the year, instead of in the first month or so of the school year;
- irregularity of attendance;
- lack of educational equipment in the school as well as with the children;
- overcrowded classes;
- unsuitable curricula;
- inability of the teachers to use play-way techniques which can assist in initiating the children pleasantly to school life;
- poor teaching of beginning reading;
- inadequately prepared teachers; and
- a wrong system of examinations.

This kind of problem is faced by the Class I teachers of many government schools. The teachers of Class I feel that the children without preschool experience and children from the preschools where there is no early reading, writing and number activity have difficulties in accommodating themselves to formal learning tasks during the initial period as they are not adequately prepared for formal learning of reading, writing and arithmetic. These children, they say, find it difficult to sit at a place for long and concentrate; do not obey; find difficult to copy from board; do not follow oral instructions, etc. Some of them are not able to hold pencil also. Teachers think that it may be due to no preschool experience or due to the preschool programme which may be based on free atmosphere where learning happens in a casual way. At the same time they say there are children in the class who have preschool exposure with early reading, writing and number works. They know to handle their reading writing material, follow instructions, can copy from board, identify alphabets, numbers, etc. In such a situation it becomes difficult for them to deal with heterogeneity in the classroom with respect to learning levels.

The researcher understands that these problems are certainly due to the gap between the two environments. The preschool programme is based on progressive philosophy of education and helps in preparing the children for later learning at the primary school

level. It is based on understanding of the characteristics and abilities of the children and it attempts to promote their optimal development. In the primary school, expectations are quite different. They expect children to learn scholastic tasks from preschool itself. This creates a gap between preschool and Class I. The difference in the expectations of the two situations undoubtedly results in a problem.

The investigator wanted to study this problem and see if children really face problem during the initial period in Class I with reading, writing and number tasks.

It was admission time, starting of the academic session after summer vacation when the investigator started her field visit programme in the Government Primary School of Sikanderpur Ghosi Village, Haryana, Gurgaon. The researcher noticed that some Class I children were in school uniform with books and bags and others were not. Researcher inquired from the Class I teacher why the children were not in school uniform. The teacher replied because they were newly admitted. Every day there were one or two new admissions but even after fifteen days of admission she was not giving them uniform, books, bags, etc. On being asked again she replied that she was observing the newly admitted children. If they will come to school regularly then only she will issue them uniform, books, bags, etc. She said these children get enrolled but do not come to school

regularly; there are chances that they may discontinue after few days. The investigator asked the teacher as to why she thinks they will drop out. The teacher replied:- there are many reasons, firstly their parents are staying on rent in the village and work in neighbourhood kothis as watchman, maid, construction labourers, etc. Their job is not permanent and as a result they may shift and enrolls their children in different schools. Secondly, these people are from far off places like West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, etc. For festivals they go to their hometown for long period and as a result lose their job; on returning they change their workplace without giving importance to location of their children's school. Sometimes families of construction labourers and others do not return. They stay back in the hometown for different reasons. Thirdly, she said majority of the parents of the enrolled children are illiterate and they do not give importance to their children's education. Children come for one or two days, sometimes for a week or for a month and then stop coming to school without giving any information and sometimes they keep playing in the 'gali', but parents do not care to send them to school. Neither these people are bothered about the school related activities. Fourthly she said, the family problems, drunken father, working mother, younger siblings at home, etc. force the elder ones to stay back to look after their household chores. On this the investigator inquired if there is no *Anganwadi* centre in the

village. The teacher replied: there are five *Anganwadi* centres in the village and out of five, four are very close to school. The investigator further asked why the young ones can't go to *Anganwadi* and the elder ones can come to primary school. The teacher replied it all depends on parents, how they manage things and guide their children. In private schools parents are scared of teachers and principal and do not allow their children to be absent from school even for a single day. They are scared once the name is struck off from the school they will lose admission, but in government school this is not the case. Fifthly, she said in private schools children with preschool experience are admitted in Class I but in government school children without preschool experience are also allowed as a result children without preschool experience face adjustment problems and drop out. The investigator asked what kind of adjustment problems they face. The teacher said, they face the problem of reading and writing of alphabets, number recognition, etc. She said, if the children are able to identify the letters and are able to hold pencil and write few alphabets before coming to Class I then they can carry on and adjust otherwise it is difficult for Class I teacher to help all the children learn reading, writing alphabets and number work in limited time. Lot of time and energy is required and with single teacher in a class it is not possible. She suggested that for teaching all children reading and writing of alphabets, words, sentences

and paragraphs, etc. minimum two years duration is required. There is lot of heterogeneity in Class I, children with preschool experience focusing on reading, writing and number work know to write and can copy from the board but there are first generation learners also in Class I without any preschool experience who can't hold pencil, can't recognise letters. To bring them all at same level more time and at least two teachers are required.

The investigator further asked the teacher if she has ever visited the *Anganwadi* centre in the neighbourhood. Has she seen the preschool activities going on in the *Anganwadi* centres? Do the activities conducted in *Anganwadi* centres contribute in learning of reading, writing and number work in Class I? Are children from the neighbourhood *Anganwadi* centres enrolled in her class? Does the *Anganwadi* worker visit the school to find out how her children are doing? Does she (Class I teacher), find any difference between the children with and without preschool/*Anganwadi* experience? The teacher replied to all queries patiently. She said though she has never visited the centre to see what preschool activities are going on but she can find the difference between children with and without preschool experiences. She said there is one *Anganwadi* very close to school, just opposite the road side; the *Anganwadi* worker of that *Anganwadi* keeps coming to our school. She told that she is helping children to identify

Hindi and English alphabets and her children can write A to Z, Hindi 'swar' and 'vyanjan'; some of them can also do number writing from 1 to 100. There are children in her class from that *Anganwadi* centre and she said that she can see them doing so. The investigator asked the teacher: 'What about the other *Anganwadies* in the village?'. The teacher said that she did not know about them.

The investigator decided to teach Class I along with the Class I teacher to understand the difference or difficulties of early literacy of children with and without preschool experience. Keeping in mind this problem of Class I children as one of the objectives of field visit, the researcher interacted with the parents of the children also. Parents of children enrolled in Class I were questioned about their ward's preschool experiences. Children with preschool experiences were few and had come from neighbourhood *Anganwadi* centres. The investigator decided to visit the neighbourhood *Anganwadi* centres of the village. The investigator found five *Anganwadies* in the village as reported by the teacher of government primary school. Out of five, four were very close to the government primary school of the village. Visit to four neighbourhood *anganwadi* centres and observation of activities organised by these centres gave investigator an idea of preschool education being provided by these centres. Out of four, one *Anganwadi* was very close to school. The *Anganwadi* worker of this centre was intermediate

and was very enthusiastic about her work in the centre. She shared the activities which she was doing in the centre to promote reading, writing and number work for preschoolers along with rhymes, songs and play activities. She said that no other *Anganwadi* in the surrounding is doing it so seriously. Her children have been enrolled in private schools in Class I and are able to keep up. Even the private schools in the neighbourhood sometimes fail to help children identify letters in Hindi and English and do number works from one to fifty, here some of the children can write up to 100. If you don't believe, she said, you can visit the nearby government school, my children are there in the school, you can check and enquire from Class I teacher. Other three *Anganwadi* centres were found to be doing the routine work, some rhymes, free play and nutrition. Majority of the mothers were working as maids in the kothis, so children were safe in the *Anganwadi* centres.

With this background the investigator planned a study to assess the influence of preschool experiences stressing reading, writing and arithmetic on learning in Class I.

Objectives of the Study

To find out whether reading, writing and arithmetic readiness in preschool helps children in learning reading, writing and arithmetic in Class I.

To find out whether normal preschool programme (development

oriented) helps children in learning reading, writing and arithmetic in Class I.

To find out which of two preschools – one stressing on reading, writing and arithmetic and the second stressing on development helps better in learning literacy and numeracy skills in Class I.

To explore other possible factors besides reading, writing and arithmetic readiness that helps children in early literacy and numeracy in Class I.

Sample

The subjects of the study were chosen from the two neighbourhood *Anganwadi* centres. Children from Centre I had undergone reading, writing and arithmetic experience were named Group I.

Out of other three *Anganwadi* centres in the neighbourhood, one centre was selected randomly and the children from this centre had undergone normal developmental preschool programme and named Group II.

Since the children from Group I and Group II were enrolled in Class I of Government Primary School, Sikanderpur Ghosi Village, so they were observed in classroom setting to assess the influence of these two different kinds of preschool experiences on their Class I learning.

The study has 27 subjects, out of which there were 12 boys and 15 girls. The age ranged from 60 months to 75 months with a mean age of 67.5 months. In Group I there were 4 boys

and 8 girls. In Group II there were 8 boys and 7 girls.

The observation of children learning in Class I was based on teacher's rating and the rating of the investigator.

Observation of Children in Class I

Since the major objective of this study was to assess the influence of academic readiness on progress of early literacy and numeracy skills, children of Class I were observed by the investigator and the Class I teacher both. The teacher was informed about the purpose of the observation but she was not told about the experience received by the children of Group I so that she would not be biased in her observation. The children who had been in Class I but were not part of Group I or II formed a third Group of subjects, called as non-programme Group, i.e. Group III. Thus the children of the entire three groups were observed by the regular teacher for Class I and the investigator for a month as the period is important for making initial adjustments to formal learning. It was interesting to find out Class I teacher's rating of the six best ready-to-learn children and the six least ready-to-learn children. According to her rating, four of the best ready-to-learn children were from Group III and two were from Group I. On inquiring about the reasons, she emphasised their proficiency in reading, writing and numbers. On inquiring parents of the four 'non-programme group' (Group III) children who were found to be

best ready-to-learn by the teacher on academic aspects of their schooling, it was found that parents were literate and children had received coaching at home and preschools attended by these children prior to Class I had a regular instructional programme of reading, writing and arithmetic and hence were able to perform well in the specific scholastic tasks of Class I.

Investigator's ratings were also the same but the reasons were different. Investigator rated them best ready-to-learn because of their cognitive skills, language development and social development. These children were able to adjust themselves to group activities, follow instructions, handle their belongings well, had leadership qualities and also showed reading, writing and number readiness.

In teacher's rating of the six least ready-to-learn children, one was from Group I and one was from the Group II and four of them were from Group III. Since the Group I had been exposed to a preschool programme emphasising numbers, reading and writing of alphabets, they were better on teacher's rating. At the same time we can see, though, they were better in academic aspects teacher had rated one from Group I as least ready-to-learn which shows individual factors also play important role in children's readiness. One Group II child was rated by the teacher as least ready-to-learn though he had undergone preschool programme. It may be because in the normal preschool programme there is a free and permissive

atmosphere and emphasis was not on the acquisition of reading, writing and numeracy skills. Four children from the Group III who were rated as least ready-to-learn by the Class I teacher, had no preschool experience. They were enrolled in Class I directly. Their parents were illiterate and these children were found to be irregular in class. Out of these four least ready-to-learn children, there was one child whose father used to beat him on asking for pencil or a notebook for school. Many a times his father had torn off the child's books that he had received from school. His father used to beat him if he used to say that he is going to school. It was the mother of the child who was sending the child to school in father's absence. Reason is not known 'why' it was so.

Investigator rated two from Group I and one from Group II and three from Group III as least ready-to-learn. Investigator found that these children were lacking in positive self concept, good personal habits, initiative, independence and self-confidence. They were not listening, exchanging ideas or participating in group activities. They always wanted to go and sit at the back without any expression on face. Punctuality and regularity was a matter of great concern for us. These children were not regular and whenever they used to come they used to come without proper books, notebooks, pencil, eraser, etc. Sometimes even without slippers. These children were not able to identify beginning and ending sound

of words; they were not able to identify shapes, primary colours; they were not able to do seriation, sequencing or able to complete the pattern with concrete objects. This shows that individual differences also prevail. Two children from Group I had a preschool exposure stressing reading, writing and number work still they were rated least on ready-to-learn.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that:

- Reading, writing and arithmetic experience received by the children in preschool of Group I helped them to attain academic readiness for early literacy and numeracy.
- Both the preschool experiences, i.e. one stressing on reading, writing and arithmetic and the normal preschool programme, i.e. development oriented helped in academic readiness to Class I.
- Preschool programme helped

children in early literacy activities in Class I.

- Preparedness at home before admitting the child to Class I, literate parents and preschool experience helped the children in accommodating themselves for scholastic tasks expected in Class I.

Implications

Experiences in reading, writing and arithmetic such as identification of sound and shape of alphabets; value recognition of numbers, holding pencil, drawing simple patterns, writing few alphabets and numbers should be included in the regular preschool programme in order to promote reading, writing and number readiness for the Class I.

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