

## Study of the Pre-primary Stage at Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, Gurudev's Ashram Vidyalaya, Santiniketan — A Holistic Approach

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### Abstract

*This article presents the opinion of pre-school and assistant teachers on the importance of curriculum followed at the pre-primary stage of education in Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, Gurudev's Ashram Vidyalaya, Santiniketan. It highlights the importance of activities followed for children so as to enable them to express their artistic creativity within modern curriculums. It also presents an empirical study that examines the opinions of pre-school and assistant teachers on the importance of educational fields, art genres and extra-curricular activities followed in the school. The pre-school teachers find each educational field, art genre and visual art activity to be of importance. Therefore, education in kindergarten has to achieve requisite holism. The paper presented is a case study. It has been found that importance is attributed to play, nature observation, learning of healthy habits, art, numeracy, movement and language, followed by rhymes, songs, dance, play and storytelling. Importance is also attributed to visual arts, i.e., drawing, craft and clay modeling. Audio-visual activities are also organised like children movies are shown to the students. Besides, the children are made to participate in jugglery, picture and other activities. Within visual arts, drawing and colouring are considered to be the most important, followed by craftwork and clay modeling. These findings can support future studies and deliberation on the possible effects on practice in terms of requisitely holistically planned pre-school education, which is the requirement for future studies.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum, pre-school education, pre-school teachers, requisite holism, extra-curricular activities

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## INTRODUCTION

The pre-primary stage at Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, Santiniketan, is an important phase of education. Patha Bhavana (secondary and higher secondary section), an Ashram Vidyalaya, was established by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in the year 1905. The pre-primary section, Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, established in 1954 in the name of Tagore's wife Mrinalini Devi, is the nursery unit of Patha Bhavana. Here, children are admitted at 4+ years and stay for two years. They participate in cultural programmes organised by Patha Bhavana and Visva Bharati. An integrated approach to study is followed here. The children move to Patha Bhavana after the completion of two years of learning at the pre-primary section. Our aim is to find out about the curriculum followed in Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala. The pre-primary curriculum followed here ensures the holistic development of children — physically and mentally. Attention is also paid to the children's emotional development with love and security by teachers, thereby, making the Pathsala or pre-primary section a comfortable place for them after home. Play, nature study and different activities make them learn various things and equip them to face the challenges of life.

As upon the 86<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendment, Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy now covers

'Early Childhood Care and Education' instead of elementary education, which has become a Fundamental Right. The Article states, "Substitution of new Article for Article 45 of the Constitution, the following Article shall be substituted, namely: provision for early childhood care and education to children below the age of six years. The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years."

This study was conducted to verify the activities followed in the curriculum at the pre-primary stage in Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala. It also aimed to verify whether the objectives of integrated curriculum, which is a requirement for the holistic development of children for early childhood development, is followed or not.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows.

- To know about the curriculum followed in this heritage institute
- To know about the method of teaching followed here
- To know about the different activities followed here in order to ensure the holistic development of the children and their future
- To know about the views of the teachers regarding the importance of education and development of children aged 4+ to 5+ years

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Research method is a qualitative study or inductive research. Case study method is used here, which involves observation of what is happening, or reconstructing the case history of a participant or group of individuals (such as a school, class or specific social group), i.e., 'idiographic approach'.

Integrated and holistic approach method of teaching is followed at the pre-primary stage in Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala. According to this approach, the development of children in the early years of learning through music, dance, art and craft, nature study, play and learning of healthy habits is, particularly, important, given the ways in which they understand and make meaning of the world around them. This is achieved through different subjects.

## PROCEDURES USED

A case study was conducted. Data collection was done through qualitative techniques (semi-structured interviews, participant observation and diaries), personal memorabilia (e.g., letters, photographs, notes, etc.) and official documents. All approaches mentioned here use preconceived categories in the analysis and they are ideographic in approach, i.e., they focus on an individual case without reference to a comparison group. Extraordinary behaviours or situations are highlighted, which can be studied.

## RESEARCH SAMPLE

The case study was done on the research sample of pre-school teachers, i.e., senior and assistant teachers, at the Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, the pre-primary unit or kindergarten. Three senior teachers, including the teacher in-charge, and three assistant teachers constituted the sample (six teaching faculty members, including two attendants and one office staff, who help the teachers). The work experience of senior teachers was more than 10–15 years and that of assistant teachers 4–6 years. There were 160 students as observed on 22 and 23 April 2016. The teacher in-charge and other teachers were interviewed. Further, discussions with all of them were held, taking into consideration the views and opinions of each. All teachers were trained in pre-primary education and also had a Masters' degree in their respective academic subject.

## PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire regarding the years of service, educational degree and position of the teachers (senior and assistant teachers) was prepared. In the questionnaire, the main part focused on the curriculum followed by the timetable in the first and second stage of the pre-primary stage. Further, views regarding the subjects taught, activities done, experiences of the teachers and importance of the curriculum followed were also asked. Observations were made and interviews were conducted.



*Fig. 1: A view of Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala*

The pre-primary section, a non-residential nursery school for the children of teachers, other staff members and alumni of Visva Bharati, started functioning in 1954 with 20 students.

In the year of Tagore's birth centenary, Ananda Pathsala was renamed after the poet's wife Mrinalini Devi and christened 'Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala'. It is housed in the two buildings where the Tagores lived — 'Natun Bari' and 'Dehali' in the Ashram, at the end of the famous Sal Bithi.

An admission test is conducted, after which the selected students (aged 4+ and 5+ years) have to spend two years here. On the successful completion of this period, they are eligible for Class I in Patha Bhavana, under whose aegis this school functions. Efforts are made to make learning as stress-free as possible. Learning is aided by opportunities for

self-expression through music, dance, drawing and craftwork. The academic year commences in June-end or early July. The admission test is conducted in April.

### **TEACHING AND CURRICULUM FOLLOWED**

An integrated curriculum is followed here, where equal importance is given to all activities of the primary and pre-primary stage.

#### **First stage**

- Nature observation or study (identification of trees, flowers in garden, birds, animals like squirrels, cats, dogs, etc.)
- Scribbling
- Rhymes and storytelling from picture books
- Teaching of healthy habits and discipline, and identification of letters of the alphabet

## Second stage

- Identification of letters of the alphabet and forming words by seeing picture flash cards; identification of letters of the alphabet is not done sequentially but according to the understanding of the children
- Numerical learning by seeing pictures or counting the given things; plus (+) and minus (-) signs are taught by counting figures, etc.
- Storytelling, sometimes with characterisation, e.g., enacting the story of *Khoka Bagh* (Baby Tiger), etc., and recitation of rhymes developed by teachers to teach students with examples

The importance of the curriculum followed for the first and second stage of the pre-primary section was studied. The curriculum includes subjects like nature study, plays, rhymes, scribbles,

numeracy and craftwork (origami). In the first stage, the children are taught letters of the alphabet but not sequentially, though they may do scribbles as they are easy. Storytelling is an important part of the programme. In the second stage, mathematics is taught for concept formation. Equal emphasis is laid on all subjects, i.e., an integrated approach is followed. The children also participate in cultural activities like literary activities, where they recite poems together, music (*Rabindra Sangeet*) and dance. Play is an important part throughout the two stages of growth, i.e., the first and second stage of pre-primary section at the Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala. *Ananda Bazaar*, a mela before Durga Puja, is organised, where the children sell handicrafts, which they make with the help of their teachers, to collect funds for social work. The timetable followed is given below.

**Table 1: Timetable for the pre-primary stage (2016)**

S.No	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
1	Conversation Rhymes <i>Alpona</i> making	Conversation Rhymes Nature study	Conversation Rhymes <i>Alpona</i> making	Conversation Rhymes <i>Alpona</i> making	Conversation Rhymes Nature study
2	Singing	Storytelling	Handwork	Singing	Literary discussion
Lunch					
3	Storytelling	Picture drawing	Storytelling	Storytelling	Clay modeling



Fig. 2: Teacher in-charge teaching in a class (teacher-student ratio is 1:27/28)

### Teaching in classroom

Different methods are used for teaching different subjects and emphasis is given to extra-curricular activities like play, drawing, colouring, craftwork, clay modeling, singing, dancing, recitation of rhymes and storytelling. Teaching is done here according to the play-way method and as per the timetable.

For teaching children in the first stage, i.e., those aged 4+ years, importance is laid on play, learning of healthy habits, inculcation of discipline and reciting rhymes. Storytelling is an important activity done with the help of pictures. Teaching of the alphabet is done gradually according to the learning of scribbles but not done sequentially.

In the second stage, the students learn the alphabet according to their

understanding. The teachers teach self-made rhymes, letters and words to the children. They are also taught about different situations. Numbers are taught to them with the help of picture counting and things like sticks, etc.

Craftwork, i.e., paper cutting and folding, known as 'origami', is also taught here. Before the commencement of Durga Puja in the month of October, the students with the help of teachers make handicrafts like fan with drawings, table calendars, clay models, etc., for a small fair called *Ananda Bazaar*, which is organised by the students of Visva Bharati (pre-primary to university level) on *Mahalaya*. These hand-made items are sold in the fair and the money collected is utilised for social services.

Few pictures, depicting the teaching method as per the integrated method followed in the Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, such as learning different shapes and colouring them, etc., have been shown in the article. Flash card method is also used for teaching words to the children. They are also shown pictures and encouraged to identify the objects as shown in them. Drawing is an important activity, where the children are given the freedom to draw, and thus, express their creativity. Teaching of numbers

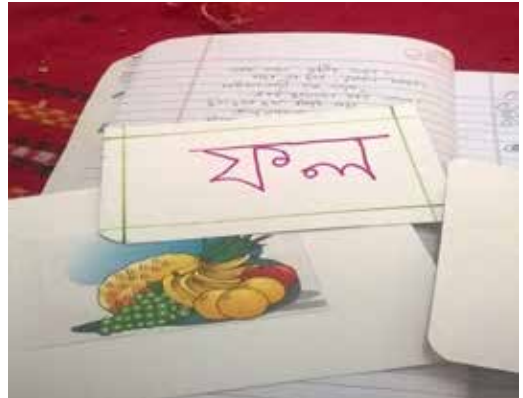
with drawing and colouring is shown in Fig. 3.

## DISCUSSION

The teachers gave their views regarding individual art activities as determined by the curriculum, such as visual and audio-visual arts, music, dance, drama, literary activities, puppetry, etc. All teachers rated the importance of visual arts. As in the curriculum, all subjects are equally important and an integrated approach is followed



*Fig. 3: Teaching numbers with drawing — integrated approach*



*Fig 4: Flash card method of teaching — letters and words with pictures*



*Fig. 5: Drawing made by a first stage student*



*Fig. 6: Number and drawing exercise for second stage students*



*Fig. 7 : Assembly of pre-primary section children after classes*

while teaching the students. But importance is given to the arts section — drawing, colouring, clay modeling and craftwork (origami). Above all, the most important activities are play, learning healthy habits and discipline regarding how to behave in school, and nature study, which was Gurudev's main idea to let the children learn and grow in the midst of nature. Emphasis is laid on the teaching of all subjects, including extra-curricular activities.

The same fields are specified in different research studies conducted in different schools. Emphasis is laid on teaching different subjects of the syllabi to ensure that better learning and growing of children can take place if the disciplines are taught to them in a pattern like the one followed at the Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, Santiniketan.

## **CONCLUSION**

This case study, which addresses a small sample of pre-school and assistant teachers of the Mrinalini Ananda Pathsala, reveals their views

on the importance of curriculum at the pre-primary stage, including other activities like visual arts, rhymes, song, dance, storytelling, etc. The following results were obtained.

- As regards educational fields at the pre-primary stage, importance is given to play (physical exercise), learning of discipline and healthy habits, nature study (to know about trees, flowers, birds, pet animals like cats, dogs, etc., other small creatures like squirrels, etc.), and rhymes for language and phonetic development. Scribbles are taught with the help of counting fingers, pictures and other material to develop the learning of alphabet and numbers among children.
- As regards arts at the pre-primary stage, visual arts, music and literary activities are important parts of the curriculum. There are other activities too, i.e., dance, song and drama. Audio-visual activities are also important. Among visual art fields, drawing and colouring are given more importance than



others. Paper work or craft and clay modeling are also taught to the children. Further, the students here participate in weekly literary sessions of the primary section.

### **EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OR RESEARCH OUTCOMES**

- The intertwining of activities about pre-school education should be researched in future theoretical, methodological and empirical studies. The requisite holism of pre-school education might be excessively left to the requisite personal holism of teachers, their heads, assistants and parents.
- The values, which education (pre-primary stage) provides, might be transferred from pre-school to the school phase in order to shape children's personalities. The children are entering an innovative society and economy, where creativity offers a gamut of possibilities. Memory and

knowledge are no longer the only source.

- Furthermore, creativity enables both material and psychological prosperity and well-being, which because of modern technologies is becoming a condition for success.

It is clear that the current investigation provides only initial findings regarding the views of teachers on pre-primary education. In-depth studies, requiring more resources, thereby, allowing for direct observation, will yield more accurate information about teachers' views.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a great educator and child psychologist, was ahead of his times. He with this institution has presented an example before the world for offering pre-service training and professional development workshops to teachers and guide them to be efficient in the physical and cognitive development of children.

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