

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The review of researches has established and reflected the positive impact of intervention programmes especially for children from marginal sections of the society. In spite of questions raised, intervention programmes have become an established strategy in alleviating some of the ills associated with poverty. If this is an acceptable premise, the question then inevitably arises; why a need for this study? The answer is that most of the available evidence offers little understanding in terms of the specificity of the impact of intervention beyond I.Q., cognitive and language abilities and academic performance. The present study was therefore an attempt to find out whether ICDS preschool experience would have an impact on finer grained outcome measures, like specific school relevant skills; in accordance with the objectives of the programme. Further an effort was made to study the child in the context of the AW programme, home and school in totality. Earlier impact and evaluation studies have dealt with influence of home or studied the impact of programme on school readiness, but in most cases these variables have been examined in isolation, as a part of separate studies. This study was therefore a beginning in reviewing these important contextual features of the children and the intervention programme. The focus was also to study the same sample at three age levels and assess the impact in consonance of specific aspects of the AW curriculum.

Hence, in summarizing the findings and drawing conclusions the emphasis is on following major questions. How far do the findings support the assumptions with which the study was planned? What does the study tell us about ICDS preschool experience in terms of the areas on which it has measurable impact? What are some of the issues and concerns which emerge with regard to non-formal preschool component of ICDS ? Finally, what are some of the major highlights which lead to future directions and how does the study relate to larger issues and concerns of intervention programmes? The ensuing discussion sheds light on these major areas of concern.

In summary, the findings lend support to the main assumption of the study by demonstrating that ICDS preschool experience has a positive impact on children's specific abilities. The experience stimulates children's development and a decisive impact is evident till the first grade of the primary school on reading readiness and specific school related behaviours. The findings strongly advocate that preschool experience is essential for children from low income families in order to give them an early advantage both during preschool years and at the beginning of primary school. Children who are devoid even of this minimal experience are ill-equipped in their developmental abilities and have not acquired some of the basic skills necessary for adjusting to the demands of formal learning.

The importance of these skills cannot be undermined in view of the fact that for children who come from poverty stricken homes, the experiences which would promote desirable school relevant skills are extremely limited. Furthermore, these children enter schools which are constrained by various inadequacies, viz; poor physical facilities, over crowded classrooms and inability of teachers to provide adequate instruction. Therefore, early experience would serve as a means to enhance children's ability to cope and survive in the school setting.

Although there are benefits associated for the children who participate in the non-formal preschool experience of ICDS, yet; it should not make us lose sight of some of the concerns which emerge with regard to the experience itself. In defining the goals of this component, there is a need to be realistic in terms of how much to expect, given the constraints of infrastructure, inadequate training facilities for the workers and the demands posed by their work environment. The experience cannot find solution to all the problems posed by disadvantaged environments. The focus in the programme should be on a developmentally oriented curriculum with emphasis on child's age related needs. This is in line with the finding which highlighted the need for incorporating activities in the programme which would cater to the developmental needs of older age group children. Non-formal preschool experience may not aim at broad academic goals but there should be deliberate efforts to inculcate specific skills like perseverance at tasks, interest in learning, ability to

adapt to structured situations, self confidence and other coping strategies in children. These are the abilities which would sustain children in primary grades characterized by unfavourable conditions, affecting the total school environment.

As far as the investment in the quality of the programme is concerned the focus should be on holistic improvement of the various constituents of the preschool programme. This would include exposure of the workers to the training which has direct applicability in the field and involvement of parents in the programme. Further supplemented by adequate infrastructural facilities, materials, efficient guidance and ongoing incentives for the workers, in order to provide support for efficient functioning. Only if attempts are made to strengthen all the features of non-formal preschool component in totality, will it result in the desirable learning outcomes in children.

The following section attempts to highlight some of the major conclusions drawn from the study leading to future directions and issues related to early intervention programmes. These are broadly discussed in terms of intervention programmes, training, research and evaluation.

Early Intervention Programmes

The emergent picture shows that there is evidence of immediate impact of ICDS preschool experience on children's developmental abilities. But the data also indicated that the gains were greater in the younger age group (3 1/2-4 1/2 years), after which they remained relatively constant, especially in

language and personal social skills. Despite the gains of ICDS children, it should be noted that their gains (especially for the older age group) were not optimal. On one hand, this sheds light on the limits of what can be achieved by ICDS preschool experience; yet, on the other hand it implies that the preschool programme of ICDS should incorporate activities which would cater to the developmental needs of older age group children. The emphasis for this group could be on pre-academic reading writing skills and other related communication skills.

- o The superior performance of ICDS children on their developmental abilities was followed by differences on the measure of reading readiness and specific school related behaviours. The important contribution of ICDS preschool experience therefore lies in inculcating skills relevant for formal learning in school. Abilities like concentration, task perseverance, attentiveness and independence would go a long way in helping the child to succeed at organized learning tasks; assuming that other effects of early intervention would be transitory. This finding calls for further research to substantiate the results obtained.
- o A further support towards better performance of ICDS children was provided by the language stimulation they received in their homes. Children appeared to benefit from a verbally stimulating environment where there was frequent and two-way verbal exchange between the adult caretaker and the child. Two-way interaction which did not call for simple association or yes/no responses but reflection which

stimulated child's thinking. Data reinforces the assumption that child's learning and development is accelerated and enhanced through mother-child interaction. Therefore, working with parents, especially the mother should become an essential component of large scale early intervention programme like ICDS. The mother education component is an integral part of ICDS programme, but the emphasis^a should be on enhancing verbal conversation between mother and the child and aim at desirable changes in parental knowledge, attitude and expectations with regard to their children's education.

- o In accordance with existing empirical evidence it was found that NPSE children possessed lower levels of developmental, readiness and specific school relevant skills. The finding has implication for ICDS programme to involve these children in its intervention scheme. Experiential enrichment is necessary for these children who come from environments that are characterized by socio-economic deprivation. This is also in line with the background information on these children which revealed that these children were at a greater disadvantage compared to ICDS children. Furthermore, their home environment was characterized by minimal language stimulation. The effort should therefore be made to involve these children in the ICDS programme by educating the mothers regarding the need and importance of child care and development. This is because if efforts are not made to intervene into their environments early, they

will continue to lag behind their counterparts and ultimately drop out from school. This is supported by the fact that eight children who dropped out of school at the end of first grade were from NPSE group.

- o The weight of the evidence summarized with regard to influence of different Anganwadi programmes suggests that only if programmes vary widely in quality will the difference be reflected in children's performance. In addition, key features of preschool component and not global estimates of quality make a difference in children's performance. The major contributors to a better quality preschool that emerged were favourable teacher-child ratio, AWW's skills and abilities in conducting preschool activities, teacher child verbal interaction, administrative support and involvement of parents in child's learning. Data was also suggestive of the contention that these specific indicators should operate in combination and not in isolation in order to influence children's learning outcomes. However, for clearer evidence there is need to further explore the crucial indicators of a better functioning AW programme. There is need to find out predictive power of each quality indicator in influencing children's development and learning. For instance, how systematic variation in workers abilities would result in differential influence on children's outcomes. Both relative and combined influence of specific quality indicators needs to be examined. These specific quality

indicators should also become guidelines on which workers should be trained in order to improve the programme's efficacy.

Training of Personnel Working with Children

- o The present study findings supported by available literature; demonstrated that a teacher is a central determinant of quality programme (both preschool and primary school). All efforts should therefore be expended at improving the competence of teachers through continuous and ongoing in-service training. The focus of the training should be on enhancing teacher's skills and improving their attitudes towards disadvantaged children. Myers (1989) notes that personal qualities, skills and motivation of teachers are crucial elements which would determine readiness of school for children.
- o Teacher education and training should aim at providing practical inputs for working with disadvantaged children, parents and the community. This is essential in view of the limited exposure and understanding of teachers regarding children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a need to devise flexible training approaches that combine short term instruction with ongoing field level supervision and follow up (UNICEF, 1990; Verma, Mistry & Mehrotra, 1985). Training programme should include components that enable teachers to mobilize resources and elicit community's co-operation.

- o Both AWWs and primary school teachers should be better equipped with materials, resources and teaching - learning aids to facilitate their working with children. As both workers and teachers mentioned; there was lack of resources for them to try out creative teaching techniques. Attempts should be made to reduce their administrative burden so that actual "time on task" could be utilized more meaningfully. It was found that time spent in actual working with children was very less. Mothers and adolescent girls from the community could be trained as para-professionals or teacher aides. This would result in community participation as well as relieve the personnel from some of the excessive work load.
- o Monitoring and supervision emerged as an important constituent affecting quality of preschool and primary school teaching. Therefore, simple and efficient information systems should be developed to closely monitor and supervise the activities of AW and primary school. This would increase commitment and accountability of workers. In order to enhance the skills of supervisors, inservice training should be provided to them at regular intervals. This is essential to upgrade their capabilities in accordance with the demands posed by their field situation.

Research and Evaluation

- o Both quantitative and qualitative data base is essential to determine the impact of ICDS preschool experience on various outcomes. Attempts should be made to strengthen the measurement techniques by aiming to devise tools that are sensitive, indigenous, culturally relevant and standardized. This is in view of the fact that in-field studies involving comparison of samples are tenuous and impose restrictions on the ability to interpret results. Incorporating ethnographic research techniques along with information collected through standardized tests would assist in gaining crucial insights which standardized tests alone are unable to tap. Only through combination of research techniques can one capture actual experiences of children in early intervention programmes and discern their potential impact.
- o There is a need for indepth analysis of classroom behaviour of teachers and children, their interactive effects and the consequent impact on children's learning. Research on teacher's attitudes and teaching style would perhaps yield information on how to improve their overall competence.
- o The study highlighted that children's characteristic behaviour processes play a role in their actual performance. These behaviours would help them adapt to formal learning with greater ease. Evaluation design should therefore include the measurement of these behaviour processes in

terms of how they are influenced by the programme and how they in turn affect children's performance.

- o Evaluation design should be built into early intervention programmes with opportunities for longitudinal follow up of children. Only through assessment of children's progress over a period of time can researchers determine the rate as well as level of children's learning and development. Focus on individual differences in children's gains and identify processes responsible for these differences. In addition, children's performance on specific tests should be supplemented by their indepth case studies and observations in the natural setting of programme, home and school. This would help in focusing on the child within the context; thereby providing ecological validity to the information gathered.

To conclude, it is important to mention that intervention research is an extensive field of study characterized by wide scope, complexity, niggling questions and unresolved issues. Therefore, research should continue inorder to shed light on issues related to programmes, training and evaluation. This will enable early childhood educators and developmental psychologists to map the various linkages between early intervention programmes and outcome measures.

Implications for the Policy Planners

Research ultimately should feed into social policy by helping generate important policy decisions. With regard to the present research and available literature; some of the major policy implications which emerge are mentioned herein:

- o The first policy implication relates to the finding concerning the performance of older age group children. In order to strengthen the gains accrued from ICDS preschool experience there is a need for provision of experiences which are in consonance with children's age and grade level. It is therefore suggested that ICDS preschool programme should have scope for age appropriate intervention. Such a policy would lead to strengthening the non-formal preschool component of ICDS as the focus would be on developmentally oriented curriculum. Consequently, the need for inbuilt assessment of children's development will become easier to conceptualize and implement.
- o The second policy suggestion relates to the need to involve the population which is not availing the benefits of ICDS programme. The services offered under the programme are uniform but strategies used to involve families need to be tailored to their needs and attitudes. This is in view of the fact that lower class is not a homogeneous population with regard to its background characteristics. Therefore for ICDS to reach the poorest of the poor and the unreached population use of media could therefore be an effective

strategy to create demand and highlight importance of child care, education and development. Only if awareness is coupled with adequate understanding of the need for the programme, will it result in involvement and co-operation from the community. Therefore, at the policy level there is a need to plan effective strategies for involving the community in the programme.

- o The third policy implication relates to the importance of investing in the quality of the non-formal preschool component. This has implication for training of the personnel working with children, as well as monitoring and evaluation. For clearer evidence, however, a further follow up study needs to be undertaken to capture the most essential features of a better functioning preschool programme and examine its influence on children.
- o In accordance with the above implication maximum inputs should be directed towards infrastructure development and training of personnel. Infrastructure should be facilitative and supportive to worker's functioning. In addition, only if the personnel is exposed to flexible, creative and relevant teaching techniques, can they cope with the multiple demands posed by their work environment and focus on quality in programmes. This would be the only means of striking a balance between low cost programmes and maintainance of quality.

- o Finally, the success of this large scale early intervention programme demands integration of programme with training and evaluation needs. In order to strengthen early intervention efforts, there is need to conceptualize all these three components together. In other words, it needs to be borne in mind that effort to improve only one of these components would fail in achieving the desired outcomes. All these three components need to be upgraded together in order to aim at improving the efficacy of the programme. There is a need to pay greater emphasis on systematizing operations related to staff, programme, training and evaluation (UNICEF, 1990).

The implications and future directions mentioned above have emerged from the study. However, available literature has been supportive and helped in conceptualizing the ideas more clearly (Halpern & Myers, 1985; Mistry, 1983; Myers, 1989; UNICEF, 1990).

To sum up, the present study indicates that ICDS preschool experience has a positive impact on children's specific abilities. Children who have participated in the experience are at an advantage compared to children who have had no preschool experience. Yet; there is a need to be cautious in drawing generalizations from the study because of the design limitations and complexity which characterizes action research related to intervention programmes. Therefore, the findings need to be viewed in light of this fact. However, the study does shed light on the factors that influence children's learning and development.