

Potential Challenges and Impediments for Effective Pre-Schools in Sri Lanka: A Holistic and Multifaceted Approach

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Abstract

Preschools are the formal basic education institution children attend to. They play a significant role in the process of socialization, personality, development, academic achievements, and social feasibility of the children who would become leaders and good citizens in future. The ability and creativity of the children are exposed and developed in the early childhood education. They, in the preschools, prepare themselves to face the challenges of the changing world ahead them. Now the preschools faces a lot of challenges and impediments such as inefficiency of preschool teachers, location of uniform system, no standard syllabus, improper teacher deployment, lack of awareness among parents, and earning purpose. However, these challenges should be met by making the necessary reforms in the system. Of them, the changes in policy level is quite necessary. The proper training for the teachers, and proper assessment system are also recommended. In reshaping these schools effective, the concept of effective preschool is the need of the hour and need to undergo drastic changes to cater to the need of present global challenges. The schools should be set up under the principal of effective and child friendly schools to supply the students for formal learning in these schools.

Keywords: Potential; Challenges; Impediments; Effective Preschools Holistic and Multifaceted Approach.

Introduction

The preschools play a significant role in the process of socialization, personality, development, academic achievements, and social feasibility of the children who would become leaders and good citizens in future. The ability and creativity of the children are exposed and developed in the early childhood education. They, in the preschools, prepare themselves to face the challenges of the changing world ahead them. The experience in the preschools

is an asset to the development of cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains of the children. That is why, the preschool is drawn important for the educationalists.

The children are the present and future of a country. Their needs, rights, and internal skills and abilities should be taken in to account. Their health, education, nutrition, and social developments are prominent to the country. These children possess a range of expectations from the contemporary world soci-

ety. The analysis of the past activities, the formation of policies and implementation, allocation for quality services and the links with the other countries as well as co-operative exercises are some the things which are part of their expectations.

In the set up of preschools, the environment and physical facilities, curriculum based teaching, teachers care, treatment of children with special needs, indiscrimination among kids, working environment, teachers' measurement and evaluations are some of the significant subjects need to be dealt with.

The secure environment is vital for the preschools. The students from various backgrounds and environments gather and study in a place which should be protective of the students. This secure place will give the children not only a physical and mental security and a healthy, pollutionless environment with ventilation. In addition, a good environment gives the children a room for free moving and motor activities. This, in turn, develops an environment of creativity, pleasure, problem solving, social and cultural integrity among these children. Similarly, the content of curriculum and teaching should possess experience, routine works, social interaction, the developments of knowledge, skills and attitude, language, creativity and problem solving methods.

On the basis of these facts, in Sri Lanka, of late, the preschools have, unprecedentedly, mushroomed, particularly after the two years protracted conflict and the recent tsunami devastation, by the influence of enormous International Non-government Organizations. There a huge number of preschools in every nook and corner. Most of them are run by local NGOs funded by the INGOs and other private Educational Institutions. The language of instruction in some preschools is English, while others in vernacular language. Although most of these preschools follow certain curriculum of their choice based on the theories and principles of educationalists, there are several activities which are not in conformity with preschools theories.

Theories and Principles Pursued in Sri Lankan Preschools

Although there are a number of philosophers in education spoke about preschools and their significance, most of such theories and principles are not found in common among the preschools. Only a few theories, in my observations were found followed. Other useful theories and principles are neither known to many of those preschools nor interested to take up in their curriculum. However, some of such theories are still used in those preschools.

In a survey conducted in three convenient samples,

preschools, Preschool A, Preschool B, Preschool C, which are situated in the region of Addalaichenai, but in different parts, several activities which are part of the teaching and learning processes found to be in conformity with the educationists principles. Such theories were observed and recorded to see if these preschools follow all the theories and principles in the teaching and learning process in these preschools.

Friedrich Wilhelm August Frobel

He is a German educator, lived and died for children. He had profound love and sympathy for children. He says "children need enormous self experience to be aware of herself/himself and the environment around her/him" (Selvaraja 2006: 02). His theories were reflected in activities in all three preschools.

The students were found to be involved in many creative activities like paper works and drawings. They were playing different games too and had one or two field trips in the vicinity of their pre schools.

He further asserts "child learn through games" and "they like play" (ibid: 3). children in those preschools were playing with toys which give them immense practice for their knowledge development. Frobel also mentions "the curriculum possesses songs, stories, conversations, plays instead of numbering, writing and reading" and Preschools are self-learning centres (ibid: 02). There were in all three preschools curriculum followed, but they are totally different from each other. However students were found to be doing several different activities given by their teachers.

Rudolf Steiner

He is a philosopher of Austria. He had his own preschool. In all three preschools, some of the theories (if not all) were observed.

In emphasizing objective of preschools, he said it is to "formation of complete child" (Selvaraja 2006: 05). There were several different activities followed, but they do not totally help develop complete child who can face challenges. These preschools only followed their ready-made activities sans any kind of innovations. He also stressed "nature of child should be understood since children develop their own individuality" (Ibid: 05). In this aspect, only in preschool A, the teachers were reporting of children to their parents on regularly basis and maintain database of family background. The other two schools, preschool B and preschool C had no such arrangements. He further stress that "curriculum should give feasibility, creativity, Arts, Experiences, Feelings and Thoughts". But the three preschools, as mentioned above followed different curriculum, they are rigid

and time based.

The “use of toys (dolls) to develop imagination and self activities” (Ibid: 06) is yet another principle of him. In this respect, children have to learn with natural objects, but almost artificial objects were used there. Their teachers were giving objects to play, but they were made of plastic and available in shops.

“Teacher has to create the environment of home”. But I do not think there is a home environment for the children studying in all three preschools. They are studying under strict rules and restriction without free movement and familiar environment. One thing is true that most of the children in these preschools seemed to be happy, but cannot say the teachers create such environment.

Song and games are important for the happy learning is another principle. Teachers practiced their students to sing several songs by heart and most of them are English. In Tamil medium preschools, some Tamil songs too were cited. In general, the songs are not familiar, the rhythm is too not familiar and almost not culture based.

Susan Isaac

He paid more attention to the mind of the children. He stressed that “children’s emotions should not be suppressed, it will affect their mind of unconsciousness explained by Sigmund Freud” and that the preschool children should not be suppressed nor subject to fear, angry, etc.

He emphasized the “activities should be based on free and of children choice”. But in those three preschools the activities were scheduled and restricted as referred to above. He “encouraged the recording of children activities, but hated functioning as psycho analysts and interpreter” (Ibid: 18). Only one preschool had such arrangement.

He also stressed that “play is indispensable and gives children self-confidence and help the other students to go to fight forcefully”. All three preschools had at least some games “to develop the ability of thoughts” (Ibid: 20).

Maria Montessori

She is an Italian doctor and had scientific background. Her theories and principles are still followed in preschools. The several principles were observed in many activities in these three preschools. Montessori believes “Education of a child is from within” (Aggarwal. 2000:221). The children were found to be involved self activities in all three schools, but mostly guided and restricted by their class teachers. Then only students will grow properly with expected de-

velopment.

It is emphasized the self-education and liberty for preschool children in the preschools. In all three schools, there were only limited source of self learning and freedom for children. She believes neither material punishment nor reward for reforming the character of students (Jazeel, 2015). This principle was contradicted in all three preschools where teachers were using canes for behavior changes as punishment and other rewards.

The principles of senses and motor training are, she also believes, important for the preschools. In that respect, several activities were found to be connected to the sense and motor development of the children. She emphasizes for no room for fairy tales, but scientific bases of development in education. Three preschools, although used practical methods of teaching to a great extent, still uses some fairy tales for teaching moral lesson.

Market McMillan

Her principles had enormous impact on preschools and they included the similar views given by the other educationists. She emphasized “home and society contribute to education” and in that context, the preschools must have contact with society, parents, and home. But the three preschools have only very limited contact.

Teacher should be trained enough in teaching to the children is another important view. But in practical, there are no teachers found to have undergone any training for the preschool education.

Challenges and Obstacles for Converting these Preschools into Effective Preschools:

Location of the Preschools

The location where preschools are set up is important. The location of these schools should be mostly in the vicinity of the children’s residences and need to reflect their true local culture and home environment. The preschools should have roomy classrooms with play space with natural objects which are found in their environment. They should be safe for the children and clean.

The two preschools, A and B are located closed to the main street where the traffic is more, particularly on weekdays. The preschool C is located inside the village close to the by lane. When it comes to the safety of the children, the students studying both in A and B have to cross the Akkaraipattu – Kalmunai main high way to get in and get out their preschools. This is a dangerous situation and the life of the students

are at times at risk when crossing the roads.

Further, the preschools A and B are located in house rented out, and possess congested classrooms. There are four classes close together in the preschool A and two class rooms in the preschool B. It was observed to have hardly any roomy place for the students to freely move about and play. Since classes are close together, they are great nuisance not only to the teachers, but also to the students.

Inefficiency of Preschool Teachers

As far as the profession of teaching is concerned, the teachers must possess both academic and professional qualifications and the experience in teaching required. Mere qualification of passing out from GCE (A/L) examination is not adequate.

In my observations, it was found that all the teachers in the preschools A, B, and C passed GCE(A/L) examination, but failed to get an entrance to the national universities. However, some of them are following General Arts Qualifying examination after managing to register one of the national universities as external students. All of them are young beautiful girls without any sort of prior experience in teaching. They have been recruited as preschools by the owner of the preschools or the president of the non-governmental organizations, just for small amount of salary, and for the acquaintance and the relationships they have with the employers.

These novices have neither followed any professional course of study in teaching nor learnt anything of child psychology which is imperative for a preschool teacher to know about the behaviors of children. They are in short inefficacy, untrained, and immature for this profession.

Lack of Awareness among Parents

Although most of the parents like sending their children to preschools, they do not really seem to have understood the importance of sending their children to preschools, how preschools are helping their children's later development, and the real benefit their children get in the preschools.

Some parents send in the hope that their children will learn some English alphabets, some English rhymes, and words, which have, if in English, become a fashion nowadays. Some of the other parents send their children to preschools because they get some free time, specially to do the domestic chore without the disturb of these children. Only few parents are aware of the significance of preschools and check how and what their children learn in the preschool (Jazeel, and Saravanakumar, 2016). They check the exercise

book, the drawings, coloring, etc. The other parents do not care if their sons and daughters study or not in the preschools.

In conclusion, the lack of awareness and support from parents are one of the major obstacles to change the preschool effective.

Lack of Uniform System for Preschools

Despite a system maintained for preschool by the government of Sri Lanka, this system is not as strong as the system of the formal school system where the students learn from grade one to university level courses. This aspect is one of the hindrances to the effective preschools. The drawback in the system is analyzed below:

No Standard Syllabus

Every preschool follows their own syllabus designed by the owner of the preschool and/ or of nongovernmental organization or copy someone else's. In the observation, all three preschools had three totally incompatible and unequal syllabi in their curricula. The contents of these syllabi had different activities and does not focus on "Competency Based Curriculum" and that the important aspects and activities which have to be part of the learning according to preschool educationists, were found missing in the syllabus. For effective preschool, the syllabi should be based on the philosophy of education and the principles of the preschool educationists. Otherwise, the preschool cannot be considered as an effective preschool.

Improper Teacher Recruitment

There is a scheme of recruitment followed in Sri Lanka when recruiting teachers to the schools in terms of Sri Lanka Teachers Service Minutes. But, there is no such scheme of recruitment defined for preschools and the qualifications required referred to anywhere. Anyone can teach without any academic and professional qualifications required in the preschools and nobody cares, even the government. This is one of the major challenges to the effective preschool in the country.

Lack of Monitoring System

Several organizations claim themselves to monitor the functions of preschools, there is, as far as I am concerned, no authoritative body to monitor the activities of the preschools in the country. The zonal education office nominates Assistant Director to keep the preschools in the zone under vigil, but its function is minimal and the preschools are not duty bounded to be accountable to any one and they seem to be functioning as self autonomous. Anybody can start and

close the preschool at any time, follow any syllabus. The effective preschool should be properly monitored by a body with power.

Earning Purpose over Service

The preschools mushroomed as many as possible particularly after the advent of INGOs to Sri Lanka. These INGOs, after the tsunami and protracted two years war, funded for local NGOs to start preschools. However, these INGOs, were more interested to earn money rather than serving the war affected and tsunami affected children. This situation seems to be spoiled the preschool system and purpose and a threat to the effective preschools. Both INGOs and local NGOs earned and pocketed a large amount of money allocated for the poor preschool children by showing the outer world that they are serving the poor children (Jeyarasah, 2005).

Unequal Access to Amenities

The preschools must possess certain facilities for the preschool children, for instance balls, different corners, playing ground etc. These facilities are distributed inequally among the preschools. Some preschools have lots of facilities and the others do not so.

The other supporting institutions, like health, and education extend only a limited support to the development of the preschools. In fact, their involvements are necessary and vital. The lack these facilities for the children in the preschools is a hindrance to the effective preschool.

Suggestions and Recommendations to Overcome these obstacles and Challenges Identified

It is obvious that the effective preschool is the important concept in the circle of education and will truly serve the purpose of preschool which develops the different kinds of skills and knowledge and prepare the students for formal education in school. The following suggestions, I believe, will eradicate the obstacles for the effective preschools.

Need of Reforms at Government Policy Level

It is a long felt drawback there is no government policy for preschools. This gap should be bridged as soon as possible. However, until such holistic policy is formed for preschools, the government must hold the responsible for running the preschool, with the participation of private sector, if need arises. The syllabi for the preschools should be uniform like the formal education in schools and designed by National Institute of Education, which should be common for

all the preschools which are operative in the country.

The materials related to the studies should be also the same for all the preschools so that there would be equality maintained and ensured. The involvement of government in preschools will help provide necessary infrastructure facilities with buildings, nutritious food, good salary and standard training facilities for teachers and scheme of recruitment for teachers.

These sets up ensure the smooth function of preschools, and lead to the effective preschool concepts.

Teacher Training for Present Preschool Teachers.

Since most of the teachers are untrained novices, they have to given a recognized training in preschool teaching. This training should involve child psychology, preschool theories and principles, methodology, assessment and evaluation; competency based learning objectives, the social, cultural and ethical values along with health habits. The teachers' college, College of Education, National Institute of Education, and national universities can take the responsibility of training these untrained teachers now in service (Selvaraja, 2006). The Department of Education and Childcare of the Eastern University, as precedence, initiated several courses and training for preschool teachers. Only trained teachers of preschool should be appointed to the preschool instead of buddy to buddy dealing of appointment in preschools.

Employment of Monitoring System and Conducive Learning Environment

The preschools should be brought under strict monitoring system where there is a suitable learning environment is available for effective preschools. The schools which do not possess space and free and natural environment should be changed to a ventilated, roomy, and freely movable place which should not be close to the highways. The preschool classroom and the place where children play should be clean. The teaching aids, natural setting in the classroom should be used as possible. The classroom activities should be based on the preschool theory and must possess an effective preschool's syllabus. They are as follows:

- a. The especial care and love for the disabled children.
- b. Activities for physical development.
- c. Skills development.
- d. Language development.
- e. Mathematical concept development.
- f. Exploration about environment.
- g. Aesthetic development.

- h. Emotional development.
- i. Feelings of security development.
- j. Health and nutrition development.
- k. Social development.
- l. Readiness for formal education.

Conclusion

By and large, it is stressed that the preschools must be brought out under a proper system which attends to the standard need prescribed in the principles of the educationists. The concept of effective preschool is the need of the hour, and the preschools which are lacking of something which are of paramount important for the effective teaching and learning process in preschools need to change as effective preschools. The present preschools need to undergo drastic changes to cater to the need of present global challenges. The schools should be set up under the principal of effective and child friendly schools to supply the students for formal learning in schools.

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