

Contemporary Early childhood Education: Evaluation and analysis

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood is the blossoming age for the development of human personality. Psychological, neurological and educational studies have found that the early childhood period is the most sensitive, critical and receptive period in life. Nowadays, when preschool education is gaining rapid momentum throughout the world, what needs to be seen is whether the most-talked-about early childhood education is being imparted in the right spirit. Does this education really serve the purpose it is supposed to? Does it aim at fostering the all-round, integrated development of the child? This research is thus an exploratory attempt to find out an answer to these questions. It was conducted to study the contemporary early childhood education in rural and urban areas. It aimed to evaluate and compare the curricular and extra curricular activities in rural and urban preschools. The sample for the study comprised of 100 preschool centres (50 from rural and 50 from urban areas). The tools used were a self designed questionnaire meant for the administrators of the preschool centres. Results indicated that in rural areas formal educational system still prevails to a considerable degree. Curricular activities are highly emphasized and children tend to be pressurized by means of regular class and home assignments, evaluations etc. Extra curricular activities like games, drawing, painting, singing, dancing etc. are carried out with less frequency thereby overlooking the importance of such productive activities. In urban areas also preschool children are subjected to greater constraints of qualifying entrance tests, acquisition of academic skills and huge learning burden. But in comparison to their rural counterparts, these children still find some refuge by means of recreational and extra curricular activities, that are given due importance in majority of the urban preschool centres.

Keywords: Curriculum, early childhood, education, preschool, rural, urban

I. INTRODUCTION

The period of preschool or early childhood begins with the second year of one's life and ends up at the sixth year. This period is very critical for the child when he starts showing his independent behaviours and working without others help. The child tries to acquire control over his environment and is now ready to explore it. He seeks to know what environment is, how it works, how it feels and how he can be an integral part of it. The second principle of development states that "early development is more critical than later development". This was expressed in an old Chinese proverb also... "as the twig is bent, so the tree's inclined". Milton expresses the same thought when he writes, "childhood shows the man as morning shows the day". According to Erikson, "childhood is the scene of man's beginning as man, the place where our particular virtues and vices slowly but clearly develop and make themselves felt." He has further explained that babyhood is a time of "basic trust" the individual learns to view the world as safe, reliable and nurturing; or a time of "basic distrust" the individual

learns to view the world as full of threat, unpredictability and treachery. Educationally, this period is very important as it paves the way for effective learning. The child is prepared in all respects to profit from schooling during this period. Enriched environment is thus to be provided for the receptive mind of the child. Some psychologists call this period as the period of 'plasticity' as the impressions that are made on the child's mind last throughout his life and influence his career. It is felt that preschool education is absolutely essential for the maximization of educational development. The Planning Commission of India in their 6th plan frame work states, "attention should be paid to all children during their crucial development years. Austin A.D'souza explains the importance of preschool education on the following grounds. Physically, the child benefits greatly from the education and balanced diet. He is trained in hygienic habits and his muscles and limbs are given free expressive play through pleasurable activity, folk dancing and free movement. Intellectually, he benefits by a stimulating environment and from an education that places emphasis not on sterile instruction but on harmonious creative growth. Socially and morally, he benefits for he is weaned from an excessive dependence, and is trained in cooperative living and in the 'give and take' of social life. Psychologically, he gets the opportunity for self-assertion and independence. He forms companions and satisfies his social urge. By manipulating objects, he satisfies his creative and destructive urges. He gets opportunities for play, make-believe and fantasy, so natural at this stage. The special environments help him to make personal adjustments. Shib Kumar Mitra, the former Director NCERT rightly pointed out that if children were made to take interest in learning right from the tender age, then it would appreciably bring down the present high drop out rate of about 60 % in the first five years of primary schooling. Hence preschool education is given special importance by the educationists as well as planners. Bloom (1964) has analyzed research data on growth of intelligence. It shows that 50 % of the total intellectual development of the child is completed by the time a child is four years old. In his book "stability and change in human characteristics", Bloom has analyzed data concerning intelligence which led him to conclude that the rate of intellectual development is at the point of highest acceleration during the child's early years. Curriculum for preschool children is harder to pin down in words than curriculum for any stage of education. We can teach the preschoolers everything we know about and also everything they want to know about. But we have to teach it in young child's terms. The mistake is doubly unfortunate if it budgets further mistakes of thinking that learning is something principally done while the child is seated at his desk in a state of relative physical inactivity. The mistake will be triply unfortunate if the preschool children are seated at desk and taught lessons like in schools and colleges. The only thing we have to keep in mind is that we have to collect materials as per programmes planned and programmes are to be previously chalked out in order to achieve the objectives set for the development of our children.

1.1.Objectives:

- a.To assess the admission criteria being adopted by different preschools.
- b.To study the curricular and extra-curricular activities in different early childhood education centres.
- c.To draw a comparison of preschool education between rural and urban areas.

II.METHODOLOGY

2.1.Sample description:The sample for the study consisted of 100 preschools in rural and urban areas of Kashmir.For selecting the sample, the criteria set were:

(a) Preparatory and day care centres- In urban areas, preschool centres providing preparatory and day boarding facilities to children were selected.

(b) Schools with nursery classes- Since crèches or preparatory schools were not available in rural areas, thus English medium government recognized schools having nursery and kindergarten classes were selected for the study.

(c) Sampling technique- Random Sampling Technique was used for selecting samples from urban areas whereas in rural areas, Purposive Sampling Technique was put to use. A self devised close ended questionnaire for preschool administrators was used to collect the data. This questionnaire covered various issues and was divided into several parts viz background information, admission criteria, staff, materials and equipments, care of children, curricular and extra curricular activities and interaction with parents.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study are presented on the basis of the objectives of the study.

Table 3.1 Background information

Background Information	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Qualification of the administrators				
Graduates	23	46	20	40
Post graduates	27	54	30	60
Teaching experience of the administrators				
Nil	-	-	3	6
1-5 years	20	40	23	46
6-10 years	14	28	10	20
More than 10 years	16	32	14	28
Specialization of the nursery teachers				
Yes	10	20	-	-
No	13	26	23	46
Experienced	27	54	27	54

Data reveals that in urban sample 54% of the administrators are post graduates and 40% have an experience of 1-5 years in the field of teaching. Similarly, majority of the subjects from the rural sample i.e. 46% have been in the field of teaching for 1-5 years. Only 26% of the teachers have no specialization in contrary to the finding from the rural sample where 46% of the preschools have no specialized teacher.

Table 3.2 Admission criteria

Criteria	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Admission Procedure				
Entrance test	17	34	3	6

First come first serve	10	20	14	28
Interviewing parents	10	20	-	-
Random	13	26	33	66
Eligibility of age				
18 months -3 years	33	66	-	-
3-5 years	17	34	30	60
Above 5 years	-	-	20	40
Parental qualification and occupation				
Important	33	66	-	-
Partial	-	-	10	20
Not at all	17	34	40	80

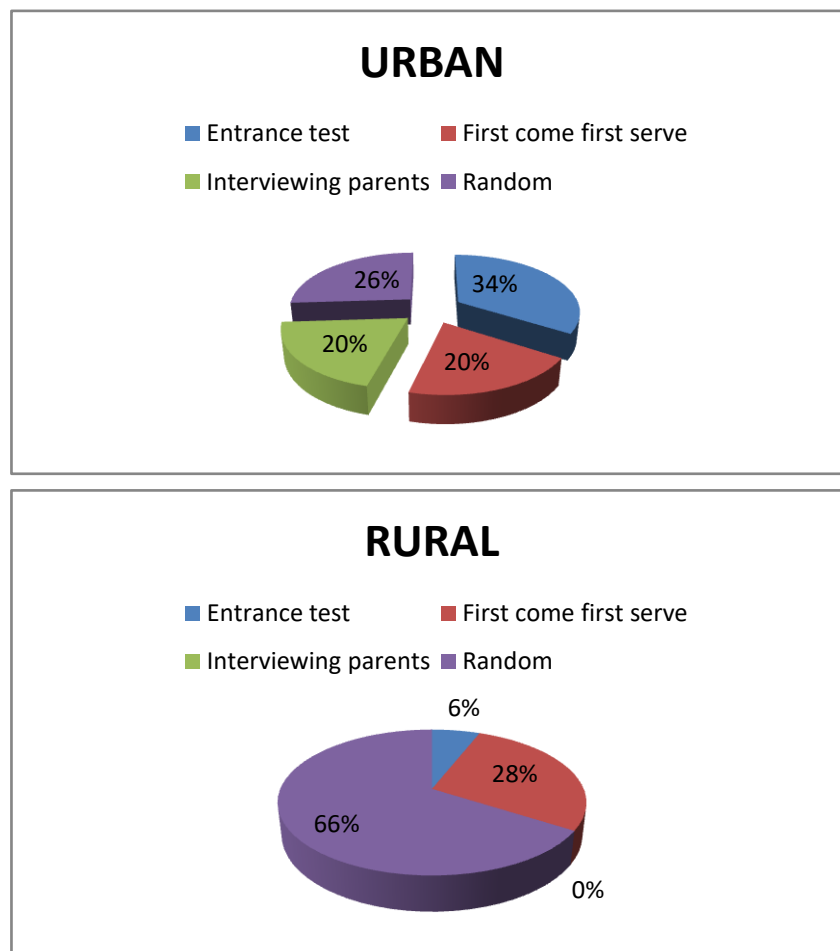


Fig-1 : Pie diagram showing admission procedures adopted in preschools

The data reflects that in urban areas, admissions are mainly granted after qualifying entrance tests in comparison to rural areas, where admission are given randomly. The reason given by most of the urban preschool administrators is that preparatory schools aim to prepare children for formal schooling and entrance tests are

thus a means of ensuring quality control and producing desired results. In rural areas, people are found generally having little awareness of such trends, therefore, the school authorities provide easy access to such students for whom admission tests can prove to be an obstacle. Moreover late admissions to schools in rural areas could be attributed to low educational level of the parents, their ignorance and lack of awareness about the importance of preschool years. The table further indicates that the parental occupation, qualification, financial background etc. is being extraordinarily emphasized in urban areas, as a result of which children belonging to low socio economic parents are lagging behind in comparison to their well-off peers. Thus flexibility in the admission criteria would be in the fitness of things. The findings also indicate that both in urban and rural sample staff child ratio is 1:15 in majority of the schools. The reasons given are, however, different. In urban areas, minimum teacher-pupil ratio is preferred with an aim to impart quality education and to provide individual attention to children, whereas in rural areas, fewer ratio is attributed mainly to less enrolment in schools. The findings further denote that 86.6% in urban and 46.6% in rural sample conduct parent-teacher meetings regularly so as to discuss the problems of parents 'if any' regarding their wards and to exchange views on important matters pertaining to the child.

Table 3.3 Philosophy and emphasis of the preschool programme

Criteria	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Philosophy of the preschool programme				
Teacher centered	-	-	-	-
Curriculum centered	17	34	33	66
Child centered	32	66	17	34
Emphasis of the preschool programme				
Preparation for formal schooling	20	40	33	66
Discipline	-	-	-	-
Over all development	30	60	17	34

Table 3.3 denotes that in urban sample 66% provide child-centered education whereas the results are exactly vice-versa in rural areas where 66% provide curriculum centered. Thus greater inclination towards academic orientation of the preschool programme can be seen in the rural areas. Moreover, 60% of the urban sample focuses primarily on the overall development and well being of children whereas again reflecting differences can be found in rural areas where 66% are only concerned with preparing children for formal classes, although these children enter a formal environment of conventional schooling right from their preschool years where they are subjected to heavy academic burden and rigorous pressures from parents and teachers.

Table 3.4 Method of teaching academic skills

Method	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Formal	-	-	17	34

Activity based	13	28	6	12
Both	37	74	27	54

Table reveals that in majority of the urban schools i.e. 74% both formal and activity based methods are used. None of the schools rely exclusively on the formal method unlike in rural areas where 34% of the schools teach children by formal method only. This difference between both sample groups may be attributed to the acknowledgement of the importance of play way method of teaching by preschool administrators in urban areas, thereby emphasizing activity based method as a mode of learning.

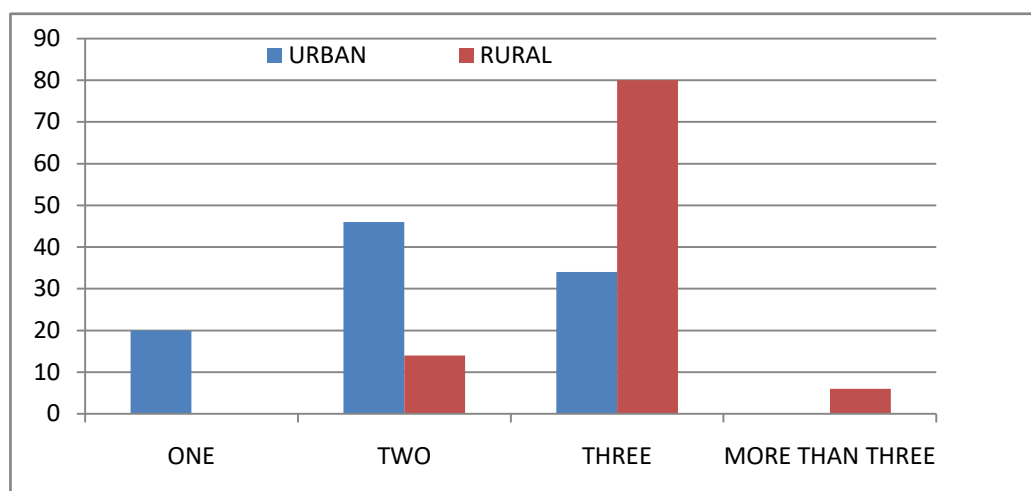


fig -2 Bar diagram depicting time spent in academic pursuits daily (in hours)

The data in Fig.2 indicates that children spend 2 hours per day in classrooms in majority of urban schools carrying out academic activities whereas in 80% of rural schools time duration of 3 hours has been fixed for academic pursuits within the classrooms. The results further reveal that in 100% of rural sample academic assignments in class are a definite part of every day’s schedule and thus are given daily. The administrators of these schools believe that in order to enhance the academic efficiency of children and to keep them away from indulging in any wayward behavior, academic assignments are essential.

Table 5 Parental involvement in activities

Frequency	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Rarely	37	74	50	100
Sometimes	13	26	-	-
Daily	-	-	-	-

It is evident from Table 5 that parents are given no role by the schools authorities in conducting any extra curricular activities for their children but the reason given by the administrators is that most of the parents are rarely available to be part of any such programme because of their own time constraints and thus the failure to conduct any such activity.

Table 6 Playing games

Frequency	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Rarely	3	6	-	-

Sometimes	-	-	13	26
Daily	47	94	37	74

Data reveals that in urban sample, games are played daily by children in 94% of schools similarly in rural areas also majority of the sample, i.e.74% play games daily.Most of the school administrators were found to be of the view that play occupies a vital significance in children’s lives and thus they should not be deprived of it.

Table 7 Organisation of dramas, plays and games competitions.

Frequency	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Dramas and plays				
Rarely	27	54	33	66
Sometimes	23	46	17	34
Often	-	-	-	-
Games competition				
Rarely	27	54	40	80
Sometimes	23	46	10	20
Often	-	-	-	-

Data in Table 7 reflects that both in urban and rural sample, organisation of dramas,plays and games competitions are rarely organised by majority of the schools.

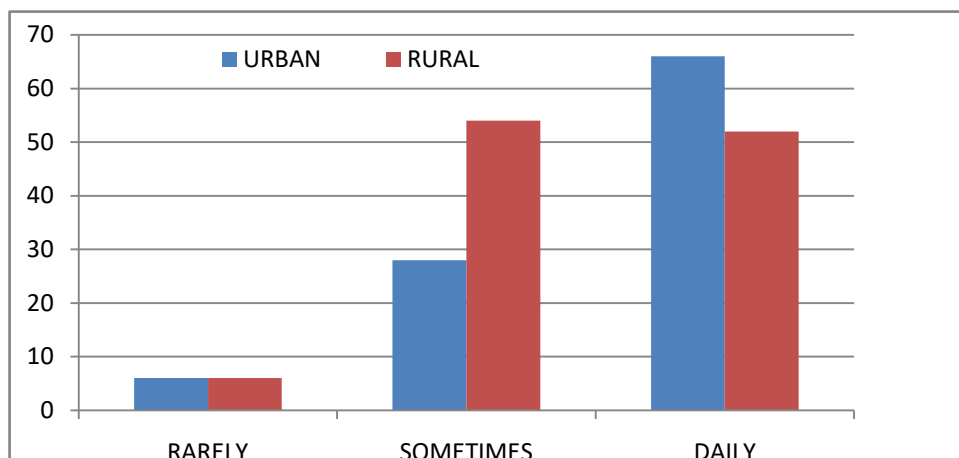


Fig -3 Bar diagram showing provision of rewards for excellence in extra –curricular activities

It is suggested from Fig. 3 that in urban sample ,66% grant rewards frequently to children for excelling in extra-curricular activities whereas in majority of the rural sample such rewards among children are given sometimes only. According to the administrators, these rewards are given with an aim to encourage children and enhance the spirit of perfection in them.

Table 8 Evaluation of academic performance

Frequency	Urban		Rural	
	Number	%age	Number	%age
Weekly	17	34	20	40
Monthly	27	54	30	60
Annually	6	12	-	-

The findings here reveal that evaluation of academic performance is done monthly in majority of the preschools both in rural and urban sample.

IV.SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The major findings of the study reveal that in urban areas admissions are granted mainly after qualifying entrance tests whereas in rural schools admissions are given randomly. The reasons given by most of the urban preschool administrators is that the aim is to equip children with academic skills and prepare them for formal schooling. Thus entrance tests are a means of ensuring quality control and producing desired results. In rural areas where people are barely conscious of such trends, and where entrance tests can prove to be a hindrance, the authorities prefer to exclude such formalities from the educational system. Moreover, financial background and occupation of the parents are other criteria followed by preschools in urban areas. Such procedures again become an obstacle for children belonging to low societies and uneducated parents, thus causing them to lag behind. In urban areas, majority of the schools adopt both formal and activity based methods for teaching academic skills and none of the schools rely exclusively on the formal method in contrast to rural areas, where formal method alone is used in various schools. However, half of the sample from the rural area has been found adopting a combination of both methods. In comparison to urban sample, rural schools lay greater emphasis on the acquisition of academic skills, like alphabet recognition, addition, subtraction, writing dictation, grammar etc. Children in these schools attend classes for longer durations of time and stress is laid on the maintenance of formal classroom environment. Daily class and home assignments and formal evaluations by means of examinations and class tests etc. are the other pressure provoking practices followed in these schools, as a result of which children are over taxed with huge academic burden. Activities such as rhymes, drawing, painting etc. are routinely carried out both in rural and urban areas, whereas recreational activities like dancing, listening to music etc. are conducted frequently in urban schools only as the facilities for such activities are not available in the rural schools. Provision of playing indoor as well as outdoor games is available both in rural and urban areas, however, indoor play materials are found to be in greater abundance as compared to outdoor play equipments in both sample areas. Administrators of these schools acknowledge the importance of play in children's lives and hence find it necessary to be included in the programme. It would be pertinent to mention here that games competitions are rarely organized both in rural and urban areas, as the administrators believe that competitions between young children develop negative feelings of hostility in them. Moreover, majority of the schools from the urban sample often give rewards to children for excelling in extra curricular activities with an aim to encourage children and foster their capabilities while as in rural areas such practices are carried out some times only. Keeping in view the above mentioned facts, it can be concluded that the preschool programmes both in rural and urban areas are more academically oriented, with the rural schools having greater disposition to focus primarily on introducing 3R's and thus the education tends to become more curriculum centered rather than child centered. It is hereby suggested that instead of blindly following the conventional teaching of academic skills, the preschool centres must strive to offer children a foundation for their overall development and enhance the virtues of social skills, self confidence and motivation in them. Moreover, flexibility in the admission procedures would be another feather in the cap of the contemporary educational system.

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