



PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF APPROPRIATE ECCE PRACTICES

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Parent Perceptions of Appropriate ECCE Practices

Abstract

The position papers on ECCE in the National Curriculum Framework (2005), the ECCE policy (2013) and the draft on Quality Standards for ECCE (2012) of India emphasize the importance of the role of families and the community in ECCE. Muktangan advocates that parents are the first teachers in the child's life; and actively involves them in the preschool program. A need was felt to understand parent's perceptions of appropriate practices for preschool-aged children so that need-based strategies could be planned. To study this, a pre-validated questionnaire assessing perceptions of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) - parenting, expectations from school, teaching practices, school environment, and curriculum was administered to over 300 parents from Muktangan preschools. It was evident that parents were unaware of contemporary DAP. Although 80% of the respondents agreed that children must play, an equal number also felt that children must be given homework. Over 30% respondents felt that children must attend tuition and an equal number consented to hit children to correct their mistakes. Over 60% of parents felt that preschool children need to rote-memorise poems and read and write alphabets A to Z. An overwhelming number of fathers felt that preschool children must recite numbers 1 to 100. These parent perceptions reflect the conventional thinking mindset regarding early year's education. The outcome of the study helped facilitators plan and implement strategies to engage families in innovative ways e.g. workshops on parent-school partnering, focused home visits, and others with a hope to change their conventional perceptions.

Key words: ECCE, parent-school partnership, developmentally appropriate practice, family

1. Introduction

1.1 Evolution of the role of parent in ECCE

Childhood is defined as the period from conception through eight years of age (UNICEF). It was as early as the mid 1800's when noted Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi said "*security at home was the foundation of happiness and since it formed the basis of children's reality, it is the basis of learning*". Since then, involving parents and community members in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been emphasized in innumerable research and quality parameters for ECE. In the UK, a report published in

1967 by the Central Advisory Council for Education (UK), on the importance of primary education at the behest of the then education minister, besides suggesting better dues to teachers, strongly emphasized on parent involvement in their child's education (The Plowden Report, 1967). Later, the Bullock Report published by the chairperson of the Central Advisory Council of Education (UK) reinstated the role of parents in children's education (Bullock Report, 1975).

1.2 ECE in India

In India, acknowledging the urgency to provide quality education to over 150 million preschool-aged children the Government of India introduced the 86th Constitutional Amendment on the right to free and compulsory education for 6 to 14-year-old (Article 21A) children and to urge states to provide ECCE for all children until they are six years old. Although ECE is not recognized as a compulsory provision by the Right to Education Act as yet. It was not until recent times (in the 12th Five Year Plan), that the position paper on ECE in the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy (2013) of India laid emphasis on the important role that families and the community play in planning, implementing and monitoring ECCE programs to ensure quality in ECE. The draft on Quality Standards for ECCE (2012) also emphasizes on 'partnership' of ECCE programs with families and community as basis for quality ECCE.

There is limited understanding of developmentally appropriate practices in ECCE, both in teacher education and parent community in India. In a nationwide research done by FSG (2015), it was found that 27.5 million middle to low-income households in urban India spend a disproportionate amount of their limited resources on private sector education for preschool-aged children. Most private settings have teachers with limited training and experience, crowded classrooms and adopt developmentally inappropriate practices like reciting numbers up to a hundred and writing letters of the alphabet from memory. They also found that 98% parents in their survey sample chose pre-schools that gave tests and homework rather than opportunities to play. It is the lack of understanding of the right education for preschool-aged children that lead most parents to believe that a good preschool is a setting which focuses primarily on reading, writing and mathematics. This exemplifies a need for appropriate teacher education and right kind of family or community involvement in ECE.

1.3 Mukangan and parent involvement in ECCE

Muktangan (a not-for-profit organization) is an innovative model of education located within mainstream government schools in central Mumbai (India) providing quality, children-centered, inclusive English-medium schooling to thousands of underprivileged children. Muktangan is truly "*Education for the Community, by the Community*", developing teachers from the same neighbourhood as the students, who become empowered change-agents.

It is now accepted that quality preschool education necessitates the advocacy of learner-centered pedagogy. The optimal implementation of preschool education and pedagogical practices mandates the involvement of parents and community to symbiotically work with preschool teachers and facilitators to develop learner-centered pedagogy (Mlgo IR, 2015). A classic study involving preschool-aged children from low income families revealed significant improvement in reading skills among children in conditions involving home reading (Lonigan JC and Whitehurst GJ, 1998). Under this context Muktangan incorporates an array of initiatives as illustrated in figure 1, to facilitate parent or family involvement in preschool education.

A cyclic model of the family-child-school association adopted at Mukhtangan is depicted in figure 2. At Mukhtangan, family-school partnership strategies are intentionally planned throughout the year. The active-constructivist learning method underlies Mukhtangan's pedagogy. At Mukhtangan, everyone (children, teachers, teacher educators or parents) learn by actively engaging in learning. With this in mind, the family-school partnership strategies are also planned with an aim that every interaction whether with the child or their family member is rewarding for all. Every interaction has clear objectives and outcomes.

Figure 1. Ways in which parents involve in children's education

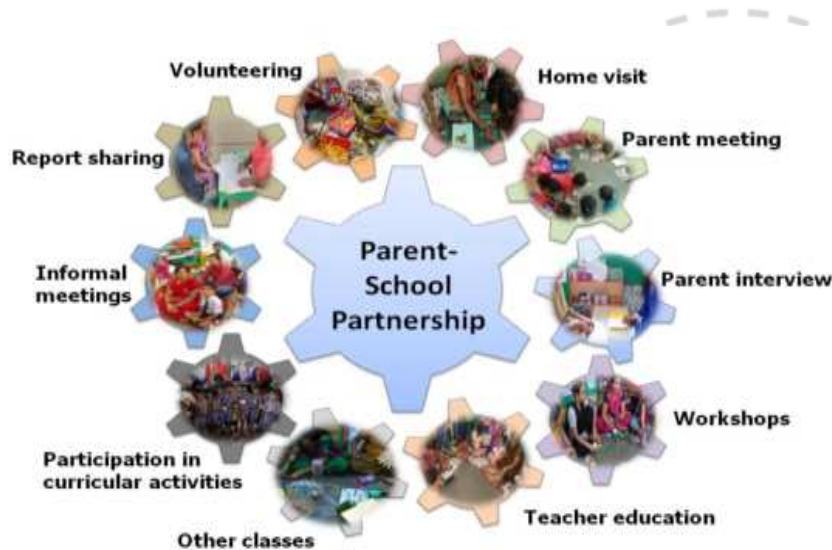
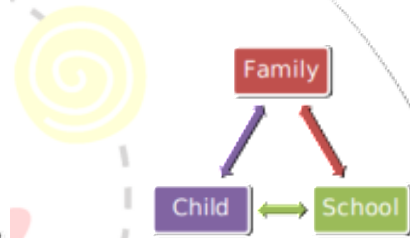


Figure 2. Depiction of family-school-child partnership at Mukhtangan.



Considering Mukhtangan's multi-pronged approach to build an effective parent-school partnership, a study was conducted to assess its impact on parent's perception of appropriate ECCE practices. The results of this study will help to re-structure the organization's parent engagement strategies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Survey process

A pre-validated questionnaire was administered to parents of pre-school children at each of the Mukhtangan schools who were willing to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was administered one-on-one to each respondent independently (mother and father individually). Pre-school teachers and facilitators were trained to conduct the survey and assisted respondents in interpreting questions wherever necessary.

2.2 Survey tool

The questionnaire comprised of elements that assessed perceptions of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in the broad areas comprising parenting, parent's expectations from school, teaching practices, school environment, and preschool curriculum. Demographic data such as family income, size of family, educational background and others were also collected.

2.3 Analysis

Individual responses were collated and tallied. Results were represented in percentage and compared as old parents against new and father against mother for respective developmental domains.

3. Results and discussion

The study was carried out at the beginning of the academic year 2016-17. The survey was administered with parents who volunteered to participate in the study. Respondents included parents whose children were admitted in a Mukhtangan preschool in the present academic year (new parents) and those who had completed a year (old parents) in preschool.

3.1 Sample description

Three hundred and fifty-two parents participated in the survey that included 56% mothers and 44% fathers. Among these 53% were old parents, while 47% were new parents. Over half the respondents were from low-income homes in urban Mumbai with monthly family income of INR 10,000 or less. Just 3% were from houses with a monthly family income of over INR 30,000. Most respondents (70%) resided in low-income housing such as slums (17%) and chawls (53%) and in families comprising of three to seven members.

3.2 Parenting

The study revealed that over 90% parents agreed that they should participate or get involved in their child's learning, spend quality time with them and talk to them respectfully. In spite of this conviction, 30% parents were of the opinion that it is fine to hit their child to discipline him and an equal number felt children could cause fights in the family. While over 80% parents agreed that children must play, a vast majority (85%) also supported homework given by the preschool. Some parents (30%) also felt that children need to be sent to private tuition right from preschool-age.

3.3 Expectations from school

Reading, writing and arithmetic are conventionally considered as the three R's of education that each school should focus on. In contrast, American epistemologist John Dewey said "*children learn by doing. Education should be based on real life situations*". Mukhtangan's intervention with parents' focuses on educating parents of the more contemporary preschool setting and practices that are age-appropriate as against conventional schooling. Notably, one of the direct outcomes of Mukhtangan's parent - teacher intervention programme is that over 80% parents felt a preschool must involve parents in their classroom activities. However, a substantial number of parents (over 60%) both old and new felt that the core purpose of preschool was to prepare children for these three R's.

3.4 School environment

It is said that play is a child's form of work. To create an active school environment, it is deemed necessary to enrich the preschool classroom with material young children can easily relate to. The study revealed that over 80% parents agreed that there should be playing material and enough space for children to play at school. Over 40% fathers whose children were recently admitted to Mukhtangan preschools felt that preschool classrooms should have conventional desks and chairs. Similarly, about 25% parents agreed to conventional school set-up of 1: 50 teacher to child ratio in the classroom. This is despite the fact that Mukhtangan's preschool classroom has low teacher child ratio (1:15).

3.5 Developmentally appropriate practices

An overwhelming number (75%) of newer parents (69% mothers, 83% fathers) agreed that children should only follow teacher's instructions in the classroom. About 40% parents also agreed that it was right for teachers to hit the child, while about 20% were indecisive. Although more fathers (60%) than mothers (38%) felt that a preschool should follow strict discipline in classrooms, over 60% parents disagreed that children should sit silent in the class. A higher number of fathers (60%) than mothers (40%) think it is appropriate for preschool teachers to give homework.

3.6 Developmentally appropriate practices in curriculum.

Educationist Robert Owen once stated "*the experiences we offer young children have a lifelong impact on the way they develop*". The purpose of preschool education is thought to aim at getting the child school-ready. However, understanding of the concept of school readiness could vary among parents. The study revealed that majority (60%) of the respondents thought that a preschool child should rote-memorize the letters of the alphabet. About 60% fathers felt that preschools should teach children to write A to Z. While only 30% fathers as against 53% mothers disagreed that preschool children should be able to recall numbers up to 100 from memory. Over half the respondents disagreed that a preschool child should know to write 5 sentences and over 60% newer parents agreed that preschool children should know to recite poems from memory. This is in sharp contrast to developmentally appropriate practices in curriculum.

The study highlighted that majority of parents (85% supported homework, 60 % supported rote-memorization of the alphabet, 60% felt that emphasis should be on writing and 60% newer parents felt preschool children recite poems from memory) still perceive conventional schooling practices are appropriate. This was despite that fact that Muktangan invests substantially on efforts to engage parents in school activities through regular meetings, workshops and volunteering activities with an aim to make them aware of contemporary and appropriate parenting and schooling practices.

4. Conclusion and implications of the study

Contemporary or non-traditional education focuses on developmentally appropriate practices in the ECE classroom and strong parent-engaging initiative over rote-memorization, recitation and writing. The emphasis is on learning through observing and experience (John Dewey) rather than teaching and repeating. Greek philosopher Aristotle stated "*It is curiosity that defines humans and knowledge comes from experience*". Although the study revealed that parents (old and new) of preschool-aged children emphasized on discipline it may not necessarily preclude warmth and understanding toward the child. One must acknowledge that in some cultures discipline and strictness (authoritative parenting) could be better characterized as 'traditional' parenting style (Jaeger E, 2013). The study highlighted that despite routine efforts and numerous interventions by Muktangan, perceptions of older parents were indifferent from newer parents in several contexts. An overwhelming number of parents supported giving homework while many supported rote-memorization and writing. These parent perceptions distinctly reflect the conventional or traditional parenting mindset. The outcome of the study helps Muktangan preschool facilitators re-work and plan newer strategies to engage families in innovative ways e.g. workshops on parent-school partnering, more focused home visits with a hope to change their conventional perceptions.

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