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NURSERY EDUCATION AN IMPORTANT STAGE FOR LEARNING – MAKE IT EFFECTIVE, EASY AND ENJOYABLE.



Prof. Ms. Shumaila Saif Siddiqui

Royal College of Education & Research for Women's,
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"All children have the right to learn, and every child must be enabled to achieve his/ her potential for growth and development through appropriate ways."

NURSERY EDUCATION

Nursery education is known by different names such as preschool education or preprimary education or early childhood education. It is meant for children in the age group of 3-6 years and provided in formal and non-formal institutions. In the formal set up it is provided by the schools popularly known as nursery schools, Montessori schools, Kindergartens, play schools or preprimary schools. According to W. V. Eyken, "The word 'school' is misleading. Fundamentally, these are centers for 3-6 year old with no formal lessons, but where children are supervised by trained staff and given an educationally stimulating environment in which through a mixture of 'self-discovery' and socializing with other children and adults, they can broaden their range of experiences and develop their skills."

The International Encyclopedia of Education has noted that preschool is the fastest growing area of education in the early 1990s because of social need and the very positive effects that preschool is acknowledged to have on primary education. This is excellent as long as:

- (a) Learning, health and the development of the child are stressed rather than academic goal or objectives, and
- (b) The age group of 0-3 is not overlooked.

Being a child-centered program with focus on the overall development of the child. Keeping in mind the fast pace at which the overall development takes place during the years of childhood especially the development of the brain, there is a focus on providing a stimulating Nursery Education. A Pre-school creates an environment to children so that they can learn maximum during these years. Whatever, is done in the nursery class is planned keeping in mind the needs, interest, developmental status, intelligence etc., of each child. Since young children are different from adults therefore, their store of knowledge, perception of things in the environment, thinking style etc., are all different and therefore teaching methodology followed for such children is expected to be different. It has been established that children learn better through first hand experiences. Since their store of knowledge is very limited and they cannot think in abstract terms therefore teachers help children learn through concrete experiences. Concrete material is provided to children and an attempt is also made to provide real life experiences to children. There is also focus on learning by doing i.e., focus on activity-based learning. Whatever is to be taught to them is actually shown to them so that they can understand the whole phenomenon in a better way and this may lead to better concept formation. This is also a school readiness program that prepares children for formal schooling. It not only prepares children to get adjusted to the school routine but also enables them to

manage their needs themselves, develop effective communication skills and proper social behavior and also lays foundation for the development of reading, writing, arithmetic and social awareness.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDHOOD YEARS

Of the entire living organism, a human being is the most complicated piece of biological engineering in the world, and its development from one single cell to a complete human baby at the time of birth and a complete human adult is one that baffles the imagination. During an individual's life there are certain periods when for no clear reasons learning is at its peak i.e., at certain periods in life, there exist possibilities of making mental acquisitions which are no longer possible at other ages. These are called 'critical periods or sensitive periods.' During these periods, the child demonstrates unusual capability for acquiring skill and degree of competence.

The reason being that, at certain times during the development of any living organism, such periods exist during which responses to the environment are potentially very dramatic and which, if not made at that stage, might be missed forever. One fascinating example of such a critical period is "imprinting," the phenomenon in which animals follow the first large and friendly object they see soon after birth.

Developmental activities like, kicking about at six weeks, lifting its chest off a flat surface in four months, sitting without support at about six months, standing with support at nine months etc., universally occur in all the human babies at almost same time.

With passage of time the baby grows bigger and also develops. Growth and development take place simultaneously and these two processes enable the child to learn new concepts, skills and capabilities. Development is both a function of maturation and learning. Regardless of how much stimulating environment children are provided, they do not learn until they are developmentally mature. Gesell studied twin girls from 1 to 18 months and gave one of them daily training in climbing from the 6th to the 46th week, while the other sibling was untrained. Despite all this practice of climbing at the end of the experiment there was no notable difference in their capabilities.

Some more similar experiments have been conducted on identical twins and it's been concluded that no amount of practice can make a child sit, walk, talk or acquire other skills until the child's central nervous system is ready for it.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and his famous theory of 'Cognitive Development' have demonstrated how from one age to another change in children's way of thinking, their acquisition of various concepts etc., take place.

Piaget has very clearly demonstrated how the children of a particular age group are not equipped to understand certain concepts and these very children after few years do not find any difficulty in understanding those very concepts. This is only because mental development has taken place. Piaget showed how the very young children build up systems of their universe through experiments and experiences and generally by exploring their environment. By 18 months they have acquired the capability of making internal representations of the external world which was not possible earlier. From this they move on to developing skills of problem-solving and with every passing year they develop the capability of solving more complex problems. Similarly by 3-4 years of age children learn their mother tongue.

But does this mean that the intellectual development of an individual is entirely dependent on the maturation process and environment has no role to play. This is not true. For proper development to take place a good environment is very essential. By good environment is meant a stimulating environment that is full of reinforcement, motivation and positive experiences for the child, an environment where the child does not get bored of living and finds an expression of his innate abilities, thoughts and desires.

From the above discussion it is clear that child growth and development are continuous processes and learning and maturation are dependent on them. Also there are certain critical periods during which an individual is ready to learn certain things and if the opportunity is missed then the individual may never acquire that concept throughout his life. Also, proper learning cannot take place in vacuum; it needs a stimulating environment which is rich in experiences and material facilities that the child can explore to its fullest

OBJECTIVES OF NURSERY EDUCATION IN INDIA

The Education Commission (1964-66) " had laid down the following objectives for preschool education in India. These are as follows:

1. To develop in the child a good physique, adequate muscular co-ordination and basic motor skills.
2. To develop in the child good health habits and to build up basic skills necessary for personal adjustment, such as dressing, eating, washing, cleaning etc.
3. To develop desirable social attitudes and manners, to encourage healthy group participation and to make the child sensitive to the rights and privileges of others.
4. To develop emotional maturity by guiding the child to express, understand, accept and control his feelings and emotions.
5. To encourage aesthetic appreciation.
6. To stimulate intellectual curiosity and to help him understand the world in which he lives and to foster new interests through giving opportunities to explore, investigate and experiment.
7. To encourage independence and creativity by providing the child with sufficient opportunities for self-expression.
8. To develop the child's ability to express his thoughts and feelings in fluent, correct and clear speech

WHO SHOULD IMPART NURSERY EDUCATION?

Teaching is the oldest, most indispensable and inevitable of all the professions of the world. The teacher is not only to impart knowledge and skills, but to lead and guide his students to 'supreme knowledge.' Hence, the qualities laid down for teachers should be very high because it is the teacher who influences and shapes the personality of the child. "The destiny of India is being shaped in her classroom," this has been pointed out by the Education Commission (1964-66). The question thus emerges what constitutes good teachers and good teaching and also how our teachers can be enabled to perform their job in a better way. One of the apparent ways of improving teaching is to strive for effective teacher preparation in teacher education institutions.

"Teaching young children is challenging and rewarding, though at times frustrating. It is an awesome responsibility to influence the lives of children from day-to-day during their most formative years. This is a profession in the truest sense of the world. Teaching by a nursery teacher will have long range implications for the child, the family, the school, the community and the world. Special preparation is required in order to do the job well."

Only a person trained in the Nursery School Education program can effectively work with small children and successfully fulfill the objectives of the nursery school program. Besides having the sound knowledge of the preschool program and becoming aware of the uniqueness of each individual, needs of the children, their thought process, their worries, anxieties, curiosity, desires and interests the teacher should also have the skill to impart them the knowledge in the manner easily understandable, develop good habits and inculcate social values in them. She should be expert in using different methods to teach different concepts to different children of the class according to their needs and comprehension level. The nursery school teacher should be able to develop innovative methods to teach the young ones. She should be soft and kind and gentle to children. She should have the capability to act as a mother substitute. Teacher of pre-schoolers should be aware of the importance of these early years as crucial years and also the seriousness of the responsibility entrusted upon her. Only a person having the above stated qualifications and a personality characteristic is truly eligible to become the role model, guide and care taker of the nursery school children.

Dr. Maria Montessori, an eminent educationist who had intensively worked with small children suggested the ways to teach different concepts to young children. She recommended that education of young children should be "consciously controlled and systematically directed." This control and direction is to be provided by the teacher, who should be an expert guide and excellent organizer. The teacher in Montessori system is called a "Directress" who should be well versed in child psychology. She must allow full freedom to the child, observe the child and intervene only when absolutely necessary. According to Montessori, development of the young child is essentially a process of unfolding of the child's inherent potentialities to learn and to acquire

knowledge.

Any attempt at educating children should be based upon the desire of the child to learn spontaneously. She, therefore, observed children carefully, determined the kind of experiences conducive to the growth of individual interest of the child and prepared the classroom environment accordingly. Self-activity by the child leads to better and more permanent learning. The adult or teacher should keep herself in the background. Her duty is to prepare the 'learning environment' in a structured, organized way with appropriate material and only guide the children.

The Overall Personality of a Child

Eminent child educationist Fredrick Froebel the originator of the 'kindergarten' system of education strongly believed that the "preschool stage was an essential step in the whole ladder of educational experience. According to him in the ECE program, education should aim at fostering natural development of children with child-centered curriculum. In the process of educating the child each child's individuality must be respected. At the same time, there should be an organized, systematic curriculum, which should be so designed as to ensure step-by-step progress of the child."

An ECE program must, therefore, maintain a balance of freedom and structure i.e., the program should try to strike a balance between allowing the child opportunity for freedom to be himself and grow in his own individual way and a structured program which would ensure that he learns the necessary skills, knowledge and values in a systematic and organized way.

Play, which is a child's natural tendency, serves as the very basis of development. Play should therefore be the medium for imparting early childhood education. Some part of each day in the preschool should be spent by children in free play and the rest in structured or guided play activity.

All the activities for nursery school program should be planned keeping in mind different aspects of the child's personality. No one aspect is less important than other aspects therefore all should be given proper attention.

Activities should be related to the following areas:

1. Cognitive Development
2. Language Development
3. Physical-motor Development
4. Social Development
5. Emotional Development
6. Creativity
7. Aesthetic Appreciation
8. Independence Training

While planning the activities for the nursery school children, care has to be taken that the activities should proceed from simple to complex, known to unknown and concrete to abstract. The teacher has to plan her activities and present them to children in this manner only keeping in mind their mental capabilities. Children of this age group are very small and have limited experiences and limited store of knowledge. As a result they have inability in understanding those concepts that are unknown to them, difficult for them to understand and the ones not related to their daily life. Therefore, the nursery class teacher has to provide different experiences to children in an easily understandable manner, present that set of knowledge to them that is familiar to them and then relate this knowledge with a concept not previously known to them.

All the activities have to be essentially in accordance with the curricular guidelines framed for pre-schoolers. Also essential is that all the objectives of nursery education of overall personality development of the nursery class children are to be achieved through good and balanced combination of the following:

1. Indoor and outdoor activities
2. Individual and group activities

3. Vigorous and quiet activities
4. Free and structured activities

For proper implementation of the curriculum, a selection of themes related to the child's life can be carefully done. The program implementation will be based on those themes executed properly in the class. Katz and Chard (1989)²⁰ listed the following criteria for selecting a theme:

1. Relevance
2. Opportunities for application of those skills
3. Availability of resources
4. Interest of teacher
5. Time of year

The above mentioned activities ensure varied experiences for the child. The indoor activities help the child sit in room and work alone or along with other children quietly for a period of time which helps develop in the child the capability to concentrate in one activity for a particular period of time. Working indoors alone enables the child to work on his own, manage his play or activity material, think independently and take decisions on his own. Indoor and outdoor activities enable the child to work or play with other children. It also helps in developing social relations among the peer group, develops in the child the capability to adapt his behavior according to the demands of the situation and deal effectively with his social environment. Activities organized outdoors where children play active or vigorous games alone or with the peers help the child develop strong physically, give an emotional satisfaction to the child and also better develop skills to handle his things. Games like running, playing at swings, passing through the tunnels, climbing the jungle gym etc., all help the child become physically strong, have better control of his body and better co-ordinate movements along with developing social relations with peers. Similarly outdoor games like sand play and indoor games like playing with dolls, kitchen utensils, house making etc., develop the imagination of the child and give emotional satisfaction to the child.

CONCLUSION:

Thus to make the learning process effective, easy and enjoyable the nursery school teacher should use the above mentioned techniques in her school program. This will facilitate learning and help in developing better personalities of the nursery children. Also, better learning means better children entering the primary classes and thus lowering of the school dropout and stagnation rate which will ultimately bring us closer to achieving the National goal of 'Universalization of Elementary Education' and an 'Improvement in the Quality of Education.'



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