

‘bala kairali nursery school initiative’ in mararikulam south grama panchayat

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Integrated Child development Services (ICDS) with its network of anganawadis covering more than 3000 Community Development Blocks in the country is perhaps the largest Women and Child Development scheme being implemented anywhere in the world. The basic purpose of the ICDS scheme is to meet the health nutritional and educational needs of the Poor and vulnerable infants, pre-school aged children, and women in their child bearing years.

The scheme seeks to meet these objectives by delivering an appropriate combination of six basic services to children aged under six, pregnant women and nursing mothers: Supplementary Nutrition, and Health Education, Immunization, Health Check Up, Referral Services and Non - Formal Pre-School Education.

The Anganawadies are transferred institution to the local self government under people’s plan. The nutritional programme is today being financed under the local plan. The LSGIs have also invested considerable resources in improving the physical infrastructure of the anganawadies. However, given the vertical nature of the centrally sponsored programme local interventions in the programme have been difficult. Therefore most innovative intervention in mother and child care sector has occurred in the non-ICDS Panchayats.

Among the services provided by the anganawadies, most of the innovative experiments have been in the field of pre-school education. One of the notable programmes that had much demonstration impact, was the pre-school Children Festival Organised by Irikur Block Panchayat during the first annual plan. Competitions were held in 4 items of physical exercise and 7 items of music, dance and other arts. As the first stage, festivals were organised in every anganawadi where all children were encouraged to participate. The winners were selected for the panchayat level festival. Finally, the block level festival was organised with selected children from every panchayat. All the participants at every stage were given a present. The programme evoked enthusiastic response from the parents and the community.

The anganawadis catered to only a section of the pre-school children - the poorest of the poor. A major proportion of children either do not go to any day care centre or go to private nursery schools that are mushrooming in Kerala. The private nursery schools ranged from high English medium elite centres to working class day care centres. An important initiative from some of the grama panchayats was the attempt to co-ordinate all the pre-primary education systems in their locality including the anganawadi centres. As example of it is Vithura Grama Panchayat, which attempted to implement a common academic programme through networking the anganawadis, balawadis, nurseries and pre-primary schools. The activities involved training of pre-primary teachers, parent’s awareness programmes, certain common academic programmes and a model pre-primary school. (Appukkuttan Kani, 2000 p. 94) Kulanada Grama Panchayat in Pathanamthitta District provided another model intervention programme. As part of their pre-primary education project, they prepared theme not for activity based curriculum for the anganawadis and organised retraining for all the anganawadi workers. (Ravindran, 2000 p. 130). The Koothuparambu Block Panchayat was yet another example

of similar intervention in pre-primary education. Their training handbook was printed and widely disseminated. (Leela, K. 2000)

In areas that were outside the ICDS scheme, the famous experiment was Kayyoor-Cheemeni Grama Panchayat, which hosted an all Kerala seminar on pre-primary education on the basis of their actual experience. Pre-primary centres were opened in all the lower primary schools in the panchayat. The centres were fully community managed with infrastructural facilities provided from the plan and honorarium for the teachers being met as community contribution. A pre-school curriculum was prepared after a long discussion with educationalists and experts in different disciplines. (Narayana. K. 2000 p.7) The pre-school activists were given intensive and continuous training. The programme attracted state level attention both for the scientific approach to the curriculum and also remarkable mass participation in creating infrastructure, making the toys and organising co-curricular activities such as children's festival. (Balakrishnan Master, 2000 p.266) Another similar example of pre-primary intervention outside ICDS programme was the Balakairali Nursery Schools of Mararikulam South Grama Panchayat.

The challenge before the local planners is has to integrate ruler innovative proctives with the ICDS programme?

Background

At the first Grama Sabha meeting in 1996 in Mararikulam South Grama Panchayat, the community raised the issue of lack of educational facilities for young children under the age of Standard I. At these village assembly meetings it was further noted that children in middle and above middle income families were sent to unaided English-medium schools, and therefore were receiving some preparation for their entry into Standard I. The children of lower income families, however, were unable to send their children to such institutions and therefore the children were not getting any formal education prior to Standard I, which placed them at a disadvantage when they entered school.

Two primary problems were identified in relation to education. First, the absences of nursery schools available to children from lower income families. The only available nursery schools for children (age 3 and 4) were at unaided English-medium schools, and therefore unaffordable to lower income families. Second, the failure of most existing schools to adhere to the new educational curriculum adopted in 1991. For many, education continues to mean the rote memorization of alphabetic letters and numerical figures. It is not about learning to think, but rather is about memorizing certain facts and figures. The new curriculum is particularly interesting as it is a much more holistic and child-friendly approach to learning. It places stress on the importance of developing the child's emotional as well as intellectual capacities and sees learning as enjoyable and to be encouraged through support and love. After detailed discussions in the Panchayat Development Seminar it was eventually decided to launch Malayalam medium nursery schools that adhere to the new curriculum.

In preparation for establishing these new nursery schools, the educational task force of the Grama Panchayat sought the advice of experts in the field of child education and psychology as well as perused the suggestions of the Central and State government's educational commissions. They further sought the advice of organizations such as "The Kerala Grandha Sala Sanghom" that have been actively involved in child development. Priority was also given to establishing a curriculum and pedagogy that built on the 1991 new curriculum. Based on the preliminary research a few important issues were raised. First, it was determined that half of the intellectual development of a child occurs before his/her admission to Standard I. Second, given the importance of this early stage in a child's development, special care must be given to encourage healthy and robust mental, intellectual, physical, and emotional development in children. Third, it was further decided that learning in one's mother tongue facilitates intellectual development. The pedagogy behind the "Bala Kairali Nursery Schools" is based on love, encouragement, and support and tries to instill the joy of learning in the

children by making education an interesting and fun experience. A lot of the teaching occurs through song, dance, and story telling. Children are encouraged to ask questions and to wonder about the world and the environment around them. They are further encouraged to share their wonder with their families and friends.

In 1999 15 “Bala Kairali Nursery Schools” were formed in all 15 wards of the panchayat. To ensure uniformity and a high caliber of instruction a series of decisions were taken. First, it was decided that only teachers with special training in early child education would be used (all instructors are S.S.L.C. and Pre-primary Teachers Training Certificate holders). Second, a systematic pre-primary curriculum would be developed ensuring the proper development of the child. Third, all teaching and play-aids appropriate for a systematic pre-primary curriculum shall be provided. Fourth, a specialized medical examination of all the children shall occur periodically, ensuring the children are healthy and receiving balanced and nutritious food. Fifth, the medium of instruction will be Malayalam. Sixth, an awareness program for parents would be established informing parents of the new curriculum and the importance of parental involvement and encouragement in child development. Seventh, periodic refresher training should be given to the instructors to guarantee their continued awareness of the latest developments in early childhood development.

Organisation

The structure of the Bala Kairali Nursery School initiative is as follows. At present, there are fifteen schools each with two teachers and a total of 342 children. The upper limit for pupils is 44, but as of now no class has more than 34 children. Every school has an eight-member “mother’s committee” responsible for making lunch for the children and actively participating in the evaluation and development of their schools. Mothers and teachers receive regular training from the government educational agency. Each student is requested to pay Rupees 25 per month, though no students will be turned away if unable to pay. Teachers are paid Rupees 500 per month and receive a twice-yearly honorarium of Rupees 3,000. The schools are housed in community libraries or other cultural organizations.

The Grama Panchayat committee decided the school center of each ward, which was followed by a general body meeting to form ward-level committees. A nine-member committee was selected by the general body meeting which was presided over by the Panchayat President and Vice-president. The day-to-day work of the school is vested in the nine-member committee with the ward member as chairperson and the official representative of the cultural organization to which it is associated as convener.

Coordinating the fifteen ward-level committees and supervising the functioning of the schools is a seven-member Panchayat Higher Level Committee. Among the responsibilities of this committee includes: weekly visits to the schools, the development of the overall curriculum, and the preparation of monthly teaching notes. They also hold general meetings with the parents in an effort to get feedback from parents and to keep them apprised of the developments in education and the merits of the new curriculum. The “Bala Kairali” started functioning after convening more than 45 general body meetings including the meetings to set up committees and parental orientation meetings. While meeting the immediate needs of the communities, the “Bala Kairali” was designed in a very holistic and universal manner. It attempts to help foster a culture of socially minded children that encourages participation in one’s own development. A notable feature of the initiative is its constant attempt to improve both the schools and education provided as well as the process of active involvement of a range of people (teachers, parents, officials, experts, etc.).

Funding

During 1998-99 the amount allocated for the project was 1,50,500/- including the plan fund of Rupees 98,000/- and the beneficiary share of Rupees 58,500/-. The project began implementation in during 1999-2000 with the funds allocated from the 1998-99 plan. During the first year, 223 children

studied in the 15 centers. The total allocation for the year was Rupees 2,12,500/- including the plan fund of Rupees 1,00,000/-, tuition fees and public contribution.

Because of the success and increasing popularity of the schools as well as the need for further improvements (e.g. leaf mats for children to sleep on, small plastic chairs to sit, larger venues for the classes, etc.), the financial requirements are also increasing dramatically. In the village meetings held to discuss the annual plan projects for 2001-02 the demand for establishing more “Bala Kairali Nursery Schools” was raised. A project for Rupees 4,55,500/- including the Plan fund of Rupees 1,62,000/-, the Panchayat Fund Rupees 1,50,000/-, and beneficiary share and voluntary service Rupees 65000/- was prepared.

Conclusion

The success of the program can be seen in many ways. There is a increasing popularity around the schools and more and more families are choosing to send their children to the “Bala Kairali” schools. Furthermore, the first children who went through the “Bala Kairali Nursery Schools” have entered Standard I and have shown dramatic achievements in their educational developments. Many of the students are top of their classes and continue to show a passion and love of learning. The holistic and loving approach to education is one of the guiding principles of the “Bala Kairali Nursery Schools” and it is proving successful in forming healthy, happy, and dynamic children who are better prepared to enter the formal education of Standard I.