

Pragat Balshikshika Shikshan Abhyaskram

(Pragat Curriculum for Early Childhood Educators)

Introduction

Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) has been working in the field of education for the past 30 years. It is recognized as an institution striving for quality education for children, implementing innovative methods of teaching in our school as well as the schools in the nearby rural communities through an outreach programme.

Since 1990, PSS has been helping children become literate through the use of Pragat Vachan Paddhati- a method developed for early reading and writing. Through 20 years of continuous work the PSS has proved that this method enables 80% of the children score high marks (above 60%) in their school examinations. This is remarkable because most of these children are first generation learners attending formal schools.

Since 2009, PSS began implementing a programme for systematic development of literacy in their balwadi classes. This was done under the direction of Dr Neelima Gokhale who has worked in preschools in Hong Kong and Singapore for 20 years as a teacher, Principal and teacher educator. This programme is of special importance to us because 50% of the children in our balwadis come from underprivileged families and research clearly highlights the importance of preschool years in children's later academic success.

Although, the main goal of the programme was improving literacy practices, it was evident that the set up and teaching methodology needed to be changed. We began by setting up learning centres to facilitate small group work. The peer interactions during these activities play a key role in children's language development. A variety of open-ended materials such as art and craft materials, blocks and dramatic play materials were made available to the children.

Simultaneously, we began to mentor our teachers to help them gain a better understanding of children's development and learning and their key role in promoting and supporting it. After reviewing four years' work, we saw many positive outcomes both in children as well as our teachers. This success gave us confidence to share our experience with others in the field. Therefore, we took the work of preparing this curriculum in our hands. Several persons working in the field of early childhood education training have contributed to the writing under the leadership of Dr Neelima Gokhale. We are grateful to all of them.

This work in balwadi began with the financial help from Sir Ratan Tata Trust. The curriculum development for early childhood educators project was funded by the Tata Education Trust. We are very grateful to both the Trusts.

This curriculum could not have been developed without the cooperation of all our balwadi teachers. Their continuous efforts, keeping records of various small details, interacting with the visitors and continuing to learn something new constantly for the past three years has given our programme a solid foundation of actual work. Along with the teachers our 500 balwadi children's cooperation has also helped us prove that this is a good way to help children from underprivileged communities become literate.

Our View of Early Childhood Education

In the last decade and a half our lives have changed enormously because of the strides in the information technology. A whole generation of learners is facing the challenges created by this technology. If we look at how our school education is preparing our children, we find that at best our schools are teaching students the skills necessary for passing examinations. This is not enough in the rapidly changing world. By simply learning to read and write, they cannot become imaginative, creative, productive members of the society. As educators, it is our responsibility to foster in children a positive attitude to learning and help them become lifelong learners. A positive attitude towards learning is when children show curiosity about everything new, the openness to accept new knowledge and the flexibility to change according to the changing circumstances. (SACSA 2010)

In the last 30-40 years researchers from many academic disciplines such as neurobiology, paediatrics, psychology, education and economics have underlined the importance of the growth and development in the early years. We know that from birth children are trying to understand the world around them. It is also known that their environment plays a large part in what and how they learn, and what they become. It has, therefore, become essential to insist on excellent education for all children, particularly in the early years.

Research has also proved that there is a strong relation between high quality early childhood education and the level of education of the early childhood educators. While developing a curriculum for early childhood educators the most important factor is the way we see our children. Our perspective of the children is that, they are intelligent and are capable of constructing their own knowledge from their experiences. In short, our thinking is based on the theories of constructivism and cognitive development. The central objective of this curriculum is to help early childhood educators understand that all children are intelligent and capable learners. The importance of creating appropriate learning environments and providing encouragement and guidance to children is also explained. The curriculum will help early childhood educators gain the knowledge and skills necessary to promote children's development and learning based on this perspective.

Being an early childhood educator is not merely about classroom arrangement and conducting classes. Establishing positive relationships with young children and good professional relationships with their parents and the community members and her colleagues, is an important part of the early childhood educator's job. Therefore they need to learn good communication skills.

With this understanding, we have set the following objectives for the Pragat Balshikshika Shikshan Abhyaskram.

Objectives:

Upon completion of the course, the teachers should gain a sound understanding of the following –

1. All children are intelligent and capable learners. Through active learning they construct their own knowledge.
2. Physical and social environment of a classroom play an important role in the development and learning of children.
3. The appropriate teaching methods that promote children’s development and learning.
4. The teacher has the central role in children’s development and learning.
5. Importance of establishing positive relationships with the children, their children’s families and the community.
6. Importance of a professional attitude towards work.

Outline of the curriculum

Pragat Balshikshika Shikshan Abhyaskram is based on concrete and successful work in our balwadis over the past four years. Before undertaking the writing of this curriculum, the writers’ group studied the curricula of six early childhood educators’ courses available in Maharashtra. We found these to be quite comprehensive but did not reflect practices based on the new research in early childhood education, especially the new ideas regarding language, early literacy and math. Also, even though the curricula have included a lot of classroom activities, a clear connection between the activities and their importance for the child development and learning is not made.

(A) The topics and subtopics of the curriculum

(i) Child Development and Scientific Foundations of Child Care

Child Development

1. What is Child Development?
2. Physical Development
3. Emotional Development
4. Social Development
5. Cognitive Development
6. Constructivism
7. The Home-school Connection

Scientific Foundations of Child Care

1. Children's Growth
2. Children's Nutrition
3. Development in Young Children
4. Planned Parenthood
5. Vaccination
6. Cough and Cold
7. Diarrhoea
8. Cleanliness
9. Customs and Superstitions

(ii) Language, Literacy and Communication in Early Childhood

1. How Does a Child Learn Language?
2. Emergent Literacy (Concept, Emergent Reading, Emergent Writing, Print and Language Rich Environment)
3. Play and Language Development

(iii) Mathematics and Environmental Studies in Early Childhood

Mathematics in Early Childhood

1. Mathematics in Early Childhood
2. Mathematical Concepts in Early Childhood
3. Pre-counting Concepts
4. Numerical Knowledge
5. Numerical Operations 1: Addition
6. Numerical Operations 2: Subtraction
7. Geometrical Shapes and Spatial Awareness
8. Measurement

Environmental Studies in Early Childhood

1. Environmental Studies in Early Childhood
2. Science Experiments
3. Demonstrations
4. Outdoor Visits

(iv) Art in Early Childhood

1. Art in Early Childhood
2. Some Art Experiences

3. Clay Work
4. Music and Movements

(v) Practitioner's Guide

1. Classroom Practices
2. Classroom Setup and Learning
3. The Physical Environment of a Classroom
4. Classroom Display
5. The Social Environment of a Classroom
6. The Importance of Play
7. Circle Time
8. Activities for the Development of Oral Language
9. The Importance of Reading
10. Observation and Documentation
11. Professional Responsibilities

(B) Structure of the Curriculum

1. As it is an in-service course, any teacher working in a pre-school is eligible for enrolling in this course.
2. Duration of the course: 18 months
3. Total Credits: 6 (Theoretical and practical work together)
 - (i) Child Development and the scientific Rearing of a child- 1 credit
 - (ii) Language, Literacy and Communication in Early Childhood- 2 credits
 - (iii) Mathematics early childhood- 1 credit
 - (iv) Environmental studies and art in early childhood - 2 credits
4. Evaluation: Attendance and participation in the 22 day contact sessions, practical work, completion of assignments and the records from the 27 supervised practicums will all be considered together for the grades of a student.
5. The timeline of the course: The contact sessions will be for 2 days every 2 months. Only the first and the sixth contact session will be for 4 days. Thus total 22 sessions are planned.
6. Practical Work: 11 days out of the total training period will comprise of practical work and practical work in balwadis or anganwadis. The trainees will get opportunities to learn firsthand important skills such as how to talk to children about their work, how to read a story, how to set up different activity centres etc. They will also be given guidance for using materials that are readily available in their surroundings.

7. Hands of Experience: The trainees will be given a chance to work in the balwadis of Pragat Shikshan Sanstha. They will gain some important experiences by observing teachers, children and children's work, setting up free play corners, doing activities with small groups of children and interacting with them.

8. Supervised Practicums: This is one of the strengths of our training programme. The trainers will visit the work place of each trainee once a month to observe her work. They will observe whether or not the concepts taught during the contact sessions are being brought into practice. They will also help the trainees to deal with the problems if there are any and demonstrate two lessons. Once every two months an experienced balwadi teacher will accompany the trainers on these visits.