ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental human right, of value in and of itself, for improving the quality of life and an essential part of social and human development (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000). Every Child has a right to be cared for in an enabling environment that ensures the child’s survival, growth, protection and holistic development. The first six years of life is the period of most rapid growth and development. Early childhood (the first six years) constitute the most crucial period in life, when the foundations are laid for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, motor development and cumulative lifelong learning.

Integrated Child Development Services scheme launched in 1975 in India is the only major national programme in the country that addresses the needs of underprivileged children under six. The scheme initially started functioning in 33 development blocks and a few urban areas in India. Currently regarded as the world’s largest community based child development programme, it aims at the holistic development of children below the age of six, expectant and nursing mothers and adolescent girls. This involves providing a package of services comprising supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, referral services, pre-school education and nutrition & health education. In J&K, ICDS was started in 1976 with 2 projects which has now expanded to 141 projects comprising 29,599 AWCs operational in the state covering a population of 10,33,197 including children, women and adolescent girls till 2015 (http://www.niticentral.com).

Considering the lacuna on the availability of evaluative studies on preschool education component of ICDS scheme in the state, the present study was undertaken to evaluate non formal preschool education component of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in Jammu and Samba districts of J&K State. Delivery of Preschool education services was assessed through availability of infrastructure, knowledge and skills possessed by AWWs about preschool component and various activities conducted at AWCs. The study also aimed to analyse the effectiveness of the services in terms of perception of local community.
Various problems faced by ICDS functionaries in implementation of preschool component at AWCs were identified. Best practices adopted by AWWs and CDPOs supervisors were documented through observations and interviews. The sample for the study comprised 240 Anganwadi workers selected randomly by taking 10% of the total operational AWCs in 13 blocks of Jammu and Samba District. 200 parents whose children were enrolled in AWCs and 200 community members residing in nearby area of AWCs were also included in the study with a view to study community perception about the selected programme component. 13 CDPOs and 45 supervisors from the selected blocks were also included as sample with a view to identify problems and best practices adopted by them in implementation of preschool programme at AWCs. Simple random sampling technique by using lottery method was adopted to select AWCs and for other sample groups, purposive sampling technique was used. The tools used for data collection were

- Observation schedule for assessing the infrastructure available at Anganwadi centres.
- Interview schedule for AWWs to assess the knowledge and various activities conducted at AWCs.
- Rating scale for assessing skills of AWWs for delivery of preschool education component.
- Self devised questionnaire for mothers and community members to assess the views regarding ICDS scheme and preschool education component.
- Self devised interview schedule for CDPOs/Supervisors to identify various problems faced and best practices adopted by them in implementation of preschool programme.

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis of data were done. Statistical techniques like Mean, Standard deviation, chi-square, t-test and correlation were employed in order to draw the inferences.
Most of previous research studies conducted on implementation of ICDS programme, especially with reference to preschool education component have revealed shortfalls on various aspects such as infrastructure, delivery of services and deficiency of teaching-learning material. Similar results have been reported based on the data obtained in this study. The findings of the present research revealed scarcity of infrastructural facilities particularly with regard to building in most of the selected AWCs. AWCs were housed in rented buildings which were only fairly functional in nature. However, the good point was that anganwadi centres were, however, accessible to beneficiaries within 1 kilometer of their residence. The provision of ventilation facilities in most of the sampled anganwadis’ buildings was inadequate. Moreover, the provision of lighting whether natural light or provided by electricity was found poor in most of sampled AWCs. The sanitary conditions in the Anganwadis were found generally poor as most of the visited AWCs had no provision of toilets. The availability of indoor space was found inadequate in majority of the Anganwadi centres. AWCs were provided with single room facility and no separate cooking & storage facilities were provided to them. The usability of indoor area was also hindered in most of the visited anganwadis due to the other activities which were performed in the same room. Children did not get much space to explore and move freely while performing activities. The available outdoor space was moderately used by most of the Anganwadi workers. The internal setup of AWCs was not aesthetically attractive and seating arrangement of preschool beneficiaries at majority of the AWCs was found disorganized. Children were seated in a congested space and did not get much space for free movement of their body. Apart from shortage of housing facility, most of the anganwadi suffered from several material deficiencies also.

It was, however, found that AWWs had an adequate knowledge about the various aspects of preschool education component provided at ICDS centres. Their conceptual understanding of preschool aspect was in accordance with child development theory.
In terms of skills, AWWs revealed high score on skills pertaining to communication with children, preparation of teaching aids, getting children’s participation in PSE activities and record maintenance. Most of the AWWs scored moderate on skills for usage of teaching aids and for organizing preschool activities. The chi square analysis showed highly significant difference (P<0.01) between the skills possessed by selected AWWs. District wise analysis of skills of anganwadi workers showed statistically insignificant difference among most of the dimensions except communication skills of workers and organization of preschool sessions at AWCs. The correlation computed between knowledge and skills reveals positive but insignificant relationship with each other.

Community involvement in developmental programme is widely recognized as a vital force to remove barriers in achieving quality of the programme. It was observed that community members were aware about the existence of ICDS centres and positive features of ICDS scheme. They took AWCs of their area as a substitute of child care facility provided by government for marginalized people. With regard to perception of community heads about preschool education component, they considered it as an important component of ICDS scheme and considered it as a way of inculcating good habits and moral values in children beneficiaries and prepare them for formal schooling. As far as involvement of community members in functioning of AWC is concerned, it was seen that majority of the community members visited AWCs once in a year and did not participate in meetings with higher functionaries. Community members were well aware about the problems being faced by AWWs in implementation of the scheme at ground level but did not provide much of their contribution. Results also reveal that community members were not aware about their role in running AWCs. The need to sensitize community members about their roles and responsibility by both AWWs and higher functionaries was noticed.

The findings of the present study reveal that ICDS functionaries faced number of problem in implementation of services delivery at ground level which were mainly related to availability of infrastructure and lack of funds. Various
suggestions provided by respondents as per their need and demands to improve the existing ICDS scheme were worked out and documented for further policy framework and implementation of the programme. On the basis of observation and interviews, the present study also highlights the effective initiatives taken by ICDS functionaries for successful implementation of scheme which were documented under best practices such as enrolment drive to motivate parents to send their wards to AWWs on regular basis, celebration of special days in the AWCs to enhance participation of children, use of child friendly indigenous material to supplement the inadequacy of preschool kits etc. The research study has implications for building up ICDS monitoring database at the national level & state level. The findings can be utilized by policy planners and ICDS functionaries to improve the programme.