INTRODUCTION

Children are the most important natural resource and they lay the foundation of the world’s future. Today’s child is tomorrow’s adult. The child of today should be prepared for the vastly complex and rapidly changing world of tomorrow. To equip the citizens of tomorrow with a sense of freedom, intelligence and physical skill, the foundation must be laid in the preschool period, which is the critical, crucial and formative period in the life of an individual. Many psychologists believe that the first six years in the life of a person is the most important period for development. This period is then extremely important in laying the foundation for a healthy and wholesome development of personality. ‘As a twig is bent so grows the tree’ is a popular proverb and it explains and emphasizes the practical importance of childhood years. This brings the importance of childhood years in sharp focus.

During childhood years, children form a naive theory of mind, a coherent understanding of themselves and others as mental beings with a rich inner world of private thoughts and imagining. Children are not like vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. They actively construct their understanding of the world by interacting with it. At different periods of their development they are capable of different kinds of interaction and arrive at different kinds of understanding.
During early childhood, youngsters are able to expand their social horizon and develop considerable independence and autonomy. The new experiences originating from the neighbourhood, school or other socializing agents are integrated into the child’s sense of being and contribute immensely to the development of personality and social awareness.

1.1 Background of the problem

A child in the age group of two to six years is a preschooler (Hurlock 1998). Preschool period is of central importance from the point of view of the child’s development. The preschool child is relatively a new comer to this world. It is during this period that a child develops reasonable control over his behaviour and is prepared to lessen his hold on the home and start a journey towards becoming a part of wider social world. According to Helms and Turner (1976) once restricted to the four walls of the home for care and protection, the child at this stage is now able to venture into new and challenging situations with other children. The early years are crucial for the development of the child in all spheres.

Child’s development does not take place in a vacuum, it occurs because the people responsible for his/her care, carefully and sensitively provide him/her with the kind of environment that will foster his/her growth and development. Many of the child’s developmental tasks are made easy when he/she is exposed to a highly stimulating and challenging environment. All parents in spite of their love for their children are not equipped to provide them with an environment appropriate for their growth and development. Most of the parents do not have knowledge regarding how to properly guide and train their tiny
tots and further those who have knowledge rarely have the time as they are struggling with poverty or the hectic pace of modern living.

In modern times more and more women are joining the work force. The joint family system is fast disappearing and it is replaced by present day nuclear families, so in the absence of mothers; servants are the main caretakers. Hence the toddler is left untrained and unwatched most of the time.

Urban life influences the life of preschoolers to a large extent. The flat system confines the child within the four walls and offers little chance for peer interaction and companionship (Nakooda 1966). Congested areas in urban setting bring about direct and indirect mental and emotional tension and insecurity feelings as denoted by Bushan and Sachdeva (1990). Flats where people live on different levels and cannot make easy contact have replaced the close one level communities of old cities. So as children go through the important four years before full time schooling starts at the age of five years, they are deprived of essential social activities with children of their age. So conscious effort has to be made to provide it for them (Reyner 1973) and this means either playgroups or playschool.

The child is introduced to a school at a time when playing in groups and planned environment are important for orientation to his expanding world. A child who has had the chance to explore and do activities independently will be ready to enter formal schooling with confidence. This personal style of self-coping that the children develop in these formative years is often the foundation for life's long patterns of behaviour and personality.
Wherever life is found, there is sure to be play in some form or the other. There is the stage when children are too young to learn certain skills and concepts, but there is no age when they are too young to play (Syvenky 1996). Froebel (1974) wrote “it is through play that the child comes to know the physical qualities of the objects that surround him, their motions, action and reaction upon each other and their relationships to the phenomenon and to himself”. The need to play is a universal feature. It is interesting to note that Hindu philosophy considers creation itself to be an outcome of cosmic or divine play. The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of later life.

For children, play is an indispensable and essential activity and has apparently been accepted as such by societies ever since the dawn of civilization. Our ancient scriptures have also dwelt upon the significance of play for the young child. The description of Lord Krishna’s play, as a child is a case in point. Early philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and educators like Comenius, Rousseau, Pestallozi and Froebel have stressed the importance of play.

Montessori (1988) describes the child at play as being in complete harmony with the basic law of endless activity, which manifests itself in every aspect of nature. Play is a spontaneous, creative activity in which anyone finds the fullest expression. Thus play represents a child’s work, a meaningful set of activities that will help him/her to relate in a special way to his/her surroundings.

Modern cities congested in every possible way have found the matter of space for children to play a grave problem. Research shows that playgrounds are essential not only for physical strength, but also for
mental, social, emotional and cognitive strength (Malley 1991). Because of this the need to create artificial play space has become indispensable. So for preschoolers this criterion is satisfied in the form of playschools, the concept of which has gained acceptance in the present millennium.

The environment of the playschools is appropriately created and contains play materials that will occupy the child’s mind, his inherent impulses to grow, learn, prompt him to teach himself at his own pace and his own manner. Playschools give the child opportunities for exploration, stimulation and for the advancement of the child’s capacities and enables him to adapt to group living and society’s demands. According to Wollman (2000) children who have attended playschools will have certain skills needed for success in kindergarten. Playschools can help the child to modify his/her behaviour so that it becomes acceptable to his/her peers.

As viewed by Nakra (2000,August) children who will be starting kindergarten for the first time will be facing some altogether challenging situations. This transition from home to kindergarten can be made easy if the child has already attended some early childhood programmes.

The brains of young children are fairly plastic and can easily respond to early intervention (Bowler 2000). The experiences in childhood and particularly in the earliest years have a crucial influence on the later personality and on all areas of the child’s development.

Temperament is the beginning point or the base on which everything must be built. The drift of evidence currently available
suggests that temperamental characteristics are constitutional in origin, but that their expressions can be modified according to the child's experience. For example although the temperament of difficult and slow to-warm-up children seldom shows any basic change, it was found that spending plenty of time with the child, respecting his temperament and using special handling tactics can induce the child to learn appropriate behaviour, get along with others and meet new demands. By playing with peers, children learn to control their behaviour patterns, so that they can get along well with their peer group.

Play as well as creative, expressive activities enable children to translate impulses, feelings and fantasies into action, to 'play out' some of their problem and such activities serve as sensitive indicators of the development of the child's personality. An important requisite for creative expression is the need to have to express ideas.

Creativity derives from divergent thinking; thinking that moves outside conventional solutions or knowledge in an effort to develop novel solutions to a problem. Divergent thinking is enhanced when the child is allowed to manipulate play materials freely. Playschools will definitely provide the child with ample opportunities to develop the imaginative and creative instincts in a child. Childhood years are the root years in creativity (Mukherjee 1965).

Playschool experiences are concerned with helping the children meet, face and solve problems at their own level. Play provides the chance to observe the features of the environment, which would be overlooked in a more pressurized, goal directed situation. Curiosity is good for children, it enables them to learn new things and preschoolers
are highly curious as noted by Nakra (2000, November). As preschoolers are highly curious they will be able to imbibe a lot of information from their surroundings.

The relationship between play and problem solving is intriguing because the non-goal nature of play seems to be at odds with the type of abilities thought necessary for problem solving. Various aspects of play are important for enhancing the ability to solve problems. It has been suggested that play provides behavioural subroutines that might later be used in problem situation as pointed out by (Bruner 1972). Play significantly enhances problem-solving abilities as noticed by Rubin, Fein and Vadenberg (1983).

Play provides the child with opportunities for social interaction. Social interaction and experience have a major influence on social conception. According to Flavell (1977), the child’s social concept has a great role to play in the development of social cognition of preschoolers. According to Wood and George (1973) the young child’s experience of the world, people and things, come to him during an impressionable period of his life through play. Play helps to develop social relationships. Pretend play/make-believe play, dramatic and symbolic play help in the child’s understanding of social roles.

Children’s social cognition - understanding of the social world depends to a large extent on the child’s social conception. Thinking about other person’s occupies a considerable part of our time. The judgments and conclusions we make about them are crucial in many aspects of our life. Studies on social cognition in children increasingly consider the social origins of mental development reflecting a growing appreciation of
how children acquire knowledge in the course of social interaction with peers as well as adults.

Play provides substantial opportunity for the child to react to the world of his/her conception. It releases pent-up emotions and enables all round development. Play satisfies the child’s curiosity and exploration needs. The present investigation was undertaken bearing in mind the profound influence of play on various areas of development of a preschool child.

Changes in life styles, in physical environment and in parental aspirations have tended to drive out play from the lives of many children especially in urban areas. A lot of problems are created by constraints of space in rooms, in schools and in public places especially in cities, resulting in the erosion of play opportunities. Play has been neglected at home and abroad because of the increasing competitiveness in the parents’ world. The electronic revolution in the new millennium has resulted in children, even the preschoolers, spending the major part of their time in playing video games, computer games and watching television. So their chance for active, manipulative and interactive play is limited.

The present study tries to highlight the issue whether the children who had attended playschools show any positive influence of playschools on certain selected areas of development - behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving and social cognition.
The result of the study will be beneficial for parents, policy makers and early childhood educators to know about the impact of playschool on the child's development.

1.2 Scope of the present study

Review of the available literature indicates that there is a real necessity to carry out research study pertaining to the influence of playschools on preschoolers, as there is a real vacuum in this area of research. In the Indian context no researcher has compared preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool to assess the impact of playschools on their development.

The crucial contribution of play activities to the global development of children has been unequivocally established. Yet play has rarely found a place in the plans adults formulate for the welfare of their children. Childhood years, the time when the child should spend the major part of his/her time playing will have a serious impact because of the adverse conditions existing in the child's environment.

The existing educational system subscribes to the view that there is a clear dichotomy between play and work. The educational programmes even in kindergartens are dominated by the 'chalk and talk' method and evoke little interest in the young child, as they do not get much time for play. The plays of childhood being the germinal leaves of later life make this area of research all the more significant.

According to a survey conducted by NIPCCD newsletter (1988) children are suffering from play deprivation. Today the situation
regarding opportunities for play at home for children are also not very much more heartening. Parents regard children as an investment and they are forced to learn different skills; which they think are essential for their success in life, even before the young child is ready for it. Preschoolers of today spend their time either glued to television sets, computers or video-games, hence passive play has become popular even among young children. Moreover the flat system, which is the hallmark of the present millennium, has also curtailed the space available for children to play. Childhood years, the time when the major activity of the child is play, will definitely have a serious impact because of these adverse conditions in the child's environment. Still this area of research is a neglected one and hence calls for special emphasis and effort.

The playschool concept has come up, to provide the children with ample play opportunities. Whatever be the feature of playschool it is in all cases a means of providing facilities for healthy growth and development of children. With advancing years more and more women are joining the work force and as the joint family system has been replaced by the present day nuclear families, when the mother is working the child is left to some caretakers especially servants. So the child is left untrained and unwatched during the crucial period of their development, at the stage when they need proper guidance and stimulation. The playschool teachers have some training in child development and hence are in a better position to provide the appropriate guidance and stimulation needed at this crucial stage of development.

With the increasing number of playschools that have come up in the present day, the investigator has made an attempt to look into the
effects of these playschools on certain selected aspects of the child’s development—behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition, all of which have a strong developmental base in early childhood.

The study also makes an attempt to compare the playschool and home environment and to point out the factors, which might have contributed to the better developmental skills of preschoolers who have gone to playschool. An attempt has also been made to find out the interrelationship among the study variables and also to find out which is the most highly influenced variable with regard to the playschool environment.

The findings of the study will help to find out which attributes of the environment are the salient ones affecting the development of children. The result of the study will be of immense help to policy makers and child development experts to plan programmes for preschoolers.

The child’s development cannot go in the right direction unless early childhood is completely nurtured by satisfying the basic psychological need to play. The implication of the present study lies in the fact that it is both a practical and moral responsibility to see that every child is provided with a healthy environment in his/her preschool years, which is the period of the ‘flowering of self’.

1.3 Aim of the present study

The present investigation is undertaken with the aim of finding out the role of playschools with regard to the behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition of preschoolers.
1.4 Objectives of the present study

The main objectives of the present investigation are as follows

1.4.1 Study the preschoolers who have attended and those who have not attended playschool in order to compare their
   a. behavioural profile.
   b. creativity.
   c. problem solving ability.
   d. social cognition.

1.4.2 Compare preschool boys and girls who have attended and those who have not attended playschool to study their
   a. behavioural profile.
   b. creativity.
   c. problem solving ability.
   d. social cognition.

1.4.3 Investigate the interrelationship among variables namely behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition.

1.4.4 Find out which of the study variable had the greatest impact with reference to the independent variable.

1.5 Definition of concepts used in the present study

1.5.1 Playschool

Playschools are childcare centres and they plan programmes to meet the child's social, emotional, intellectual as well as physical needs as observed by Read (1973). A playgroup does not try to teach a child traditional subjects such as reading, writing and arithmetic. The
playgroup aims at learning through play, providing the stimulation and situation for the all-round development of the child (Reynols 1987).

Playschool in the present study includes all informal and private schools enrolling children in the age group of two and a half years to four years. Play is the major activity carried out in these schools and no formal teaching is undertaken in such schools.

1.5.2 Behavioural profile

Thomas et al (1963, 1977) have defined temperament as the characteristic tempo, energy expenditure, and mood and rhythmicity typifying the behaviour of an individual child.

Indulekha (1977) has grouped the nine dimensions of temperament identified by Thomas et al under two headings as reaction pattern and intensity of reaction. Under reaction pattern, six dimensions—rhythmicity, approach withdrawal, adaptability, distractibility, attention span and persistence and quality of mood—which enable to differentiate the responses in terms of positive and negative patterns, were included. Three dimensions of behavioural profile—activity level, threshold of responsiveness and vigour of reaction—were included under the intensity of reaction to describe the behaviour as intense or mild.

Behavioural profile in the present study has made use of the views of both Thomas et al (1963, 77) and Indulekha (1977).

1.5.3 Creativity

Creativity is a kind of thinking with respect to the traits of fluency, flexibility and originality (Guilford 1969).
Creativity as used in the present study is based on the theoretical constructs put forth by Guilford (1969).

1.5.4 Problem solving ability

Problem solving as per Helms and Turner (1989) and Kuppuswamy (1986) includes concept formation and generalization. As noted by Fisher (1990) memory is important in all thinking and is involved in all stages of problem solving.

In the present study problem solving is assessed using a series of tests which included memory test, test to check children's concept of the human body, test to know the concept of shape using shape sorter and puzzle.

1.5.5 Social cognition

As noted by McGurk (1978) social cognition includes three components namely the knowledge of self, of others and of relationship. Flavell (1977) has stated that social concepts determine social cognition and that the young child's social concepts are based on character attribution as remarked by Craig (1996).

Social cognition in the present study has been assessed by asking children to describe their father, mother, teacher and themselves in the way they want to.

1.5.6 Preschoolers

Children between the ages of three and six years are in the preschool period as per Nakra (2000, November).
In this study the term preschoolers include both boys and girls of four years age who are attending lower kindergarten.

1.5.7 Socio-economic status

The socio-economic status (SES) variable is the sum of the scores awarded for father's and mother's education, father's and mother's occupation and monthly income of parents.

1.6 Hypotheses formulated for the present study

The following hypotheses have been formulated for the study in accordance with the objectives.

1.6.a Primary hypotheses

1.6.1 There will be significant difference with regard to the behavioural profile of

i. preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

ii. preschool boys who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iii. preschool girls who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iv. preschool boys and girls in general.

The nine dimensions and two categories of behavioural profile tested are:

a. activity level.

b. rhythmicity.
c. approach withdrawal.
d. adaptability.
e. threshold of responsiveness.
f. vigour of reaction.
g. quality of mood.
h. distractibility.
i. attention span and persistence.
j. reaction pattern (total).
k. intensity of reaction (total).

1.6.2 There will be significant difference with regard to the creativity of
i. preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.
ii. preschool boys who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.
iii. preschool girls who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.
iv. preschool boys and girls in general.

The different aspects of creativity tested are:

a. overall creativity
b. non-verbal fluency.
c. non-verbal flexibility.
d. non-verbal creativity.
e. verbal fluency.
f. verbal flexibility.
g. verbal creativity.
1.6.3 There will be significant difference with regard to the problem solving ability of

i. preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

ii. preschool boys who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iii. preschool girls who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iv. preschool boys and girls in general.

The different areas included in problem solving ability tests are:

a. total for all problem-solving tests (general).

b. memory test.

c. test to measure the concept of the human body.

d. test using shape sorter.

e. test using puzzle.

1.6.4 There will be significant difference with regard to the social cognition of

i. preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

ii. preschool boys who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iii. preschool girls who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iv. preschool boys and girls in general.
The tested aspects of social cognition are:

a. in general (total for social cognition).

b. about their father.

c. about their mother.

d. about their teacher.

e. about themselves.

1.6.5 There will be significant difference with regard to the socio-economic status of

i. preschoolers who had attended and those who had not attended playschool

ii. preschool boys who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iii. preschool girls who had attended and those who had not attended playschool.

iv. preschool boys and girls in general.

1.6.6 There will be a significant relationship between the study variables-

behavioural profile (its two categories - reaction pattern and intensity of reaction), creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition.

1.6.7 Playschool environment will have a significantly differential impact on study variables.

1.6.b. Secondary hypotheses

1.6.8 There will be significant difference in the contribution of every aspect within each study variable - the two categories of
behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition to the total score.

1.6.9 There will be interrelationship between every aspect within each study variable—the two categories of behavioural profile, creativity, problem solving ability and social cognition.