

Main Course Without the Dessert: A Few Insights from the Exploratory Study of Small Budget Private Preschools in Delhi

Savita Kaushal

skaushal@jmi.ac.in
Jamia Millia Islamia
(INDIA)

ABSTRACT: *As a result of the growing awareness of the importance of the first six years of a child's life, an enormous number of initiatives are being made across the globe to ensure universal access to quality ECCE for all children. India, too, has made major reforms in this direction. In this context, one of the significant developments has been the National Education Policy 2020. This is the first education policy of the 21st Century. This policy lays significant emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (3-6 years) by ensuring universal access to high-quality ECCE across the country to be achieved no later than 2030. Over the last decade, India has seen a drastic change in the ownership of preschools; in terms of private preschools, though fewer in number, multiplying rapidly. The popular perception of preschool education is that the government can address coverage, and private initiatives can provide efficiency. Many parents also perceive private preschools as more efficient in fulfilling their aspirations. They are also willing to pay for their children's preschool education disregarding the affordability. There is monopolistic competition in private preschools at the national level, specifically by the growth of many branded private preschools. Apart from this, there are a large number of private stand-alone preschools that have emerged to cater to the growing needs of the preschool provision. Among these private preschools, there are also small-budget private preschools (SBPPS) run by individual enterprises. These SBPPS charge low fees and are affordable to middle and lower-middle-class families. The present study attempts to study the SBPPS regarding infrastructural facilities (human and physical), the teaching-learning strategies, and the parents' connotations regarding preschool education.*

KEYWORDS: Small budget Private Preschools, National Education Policy 2020, ECCE.

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1. Introduction

Keeping in view the importance of ECCE, UNESCO (2019) asserted that ECCE is one of the best investments a country can make to promote human resource development, gender equality, and social cohesion and to reduce the costs for later remedial programmes. For disadvantaged children, ECCE plays an important role in compensating for the disadvantages in the family and combating educational inequalities. This approach is reinforced in the Education 2030 agenda and in particular in target 4.2 of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims that by 2030 we need to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

In this context, it is important to note that the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of females

(15 to 64 years) has dropped significantly over the last 30 years. It was around 32% in the early 1990s, and it is estimated to have dropped to about 25% in 2019. Most young mothers in the next decade will not be very young, as the median age of marriage has increased from 18.2 years in 2001 to nearly 21.7 in rural India and 23.4 in urban India by 2016. These changes in the profile of the Indian mother are a trendsetter for the growing need for preschool education in India.

India has made major reforms in education by coming up with the National Education Policy 2020, the first education policy of the 21st. Under the new policy, the old pattern of the 10+2 structure will be replaced with a new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 covering ages 3-18 years, thereby laying the required emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (3-6-year-olds).

2. Literature review

Irfan et al. (2017), in an FSG research report entitled “The Preschool Promise: The Opportunity to Transform Learning Outcomes for India’s Working Poor,” stated that India’s working poor have confidence that the preschooling is an important component in guaranteeing the academic success of their child. It was found that the majority (95 percent) of four- and five-year-old children were enrolled in the pre-primary classes. Pressure by the peer group also plays a significant role, as about one-third of the parents reported it as one of the reasons for enrolling. Most parents (90 percent) cited the child’s better academic prospects as the reason for the enrollment. Parents expressed that pre-primary schooling helped their child academically as it strongly focused on English and numeracy. Moreover, the habits required in a school, such as doing exercises, taking assessments, and sitting silently in the class, were also developed. The majority of the parents (87 percent) enrolled their children in a private preschool rather than choosing for free public preschool choices.

Nowadays, children aged between 3 and 6 years mostly attend one of the two major forms of preschool, public and private preschools in Delhi. Even though government preschools are free of any financial cost to the parents, their preference is more towards private preschools. This fact is further supported by various researches at the National and international levels. Baird Ross (2009) reported that private schooling is driven by demand in the developing world. Private schools exist because of the belief of the parents that these schools deliver improved quality of early childhood education than that provided by the government schools. Elliot A.(2004) reported that the parents were actively selecting the early childhood services that were meeting their needs. The parents have turned out to be active and know the educational services’ consumers.

Delhi is the capital of India and also a metropolitan city. Many young people migrate to Delhi in search of better job opportunities and a better life. This results in the growing demand for preschool education. As a result, a number of private preschools have come up. Preschools can be easily set up as they do not require any recognition/accreditation. Many small-budget private preschools (SBPPS) run by individuals or private alliances have also come up. The fees charged

by the SBPPS are reasonable. They are a wide diversity in terms of their course offerings. Some may register children only for the preschool or while some are up to the 5th grade also. It is felt necessary to determine the implementation of preschool education by the SBPPS. The objective of the study was to :

- study the small budget private preschool education providers in terms of their human resources;
- study the provisions made available by the small budget private preschools;
- find out the transition rate of the children from small budget private preschools to primary level;
- study the connotations of preschool education as perceived by the parents.

3. Methodology

The study aimed to determine teachers’ professional status, availability of teaching-learning materials, play kits/materials, and other such facilities provided by the SBPPS in the state. For the study, the investigator identified 10 small sample budget private preschools located in the East Delhi District. The investigator used a mixed-method for the study where both qualitative and quantitative source of information was collected from the sample. The primary data and information were mainly collected through structured scheduled parent questionnaires and open-ended interviews with the parents.

The researcher used tools such as interviews and questionnaires. Hence, primary data was collected by observations of the preschool, followed by a brief discussion with a headmistress, teachers, and the parents. In addition, the tool for ascertaining the transition among the children from preschool to primary level was also employed.

4. Results

4.1. Preschool programs and their owners

All of these sample preschools were small in size, with about 60 to 150 children enrolled in them, and were charging minimal fees in the range of Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500 per month. The preschool owner in 90 % of the cases was female and was running preschools as an individual or as a family initiative. Most of them (90%) also did not have any prior background in education. The owners looked upon themselves as the public entrepreneurs, making an initiative to

Table 1. Sample of the Study

District	SBPPS	Head Mistress	Teachers	Parents	SBPPS Children	Primary Children
East Delhi	10	10	42	80	160	160

bring education to the children in their community and at the same time trying to build an independent business enterprise. They expressed that, like any other entrepreneur, they were also offering services, incurring costs, and making small profits. Some of them expressed that they were trying on their own way to innovate in the preschools. They defined their own versions of what a quality preschool entails and accordingly set up the vision and mission of their preschool. The owners informed that they had a curriculum that was as per the government norms. Different SBPPS adopted different approaches and focus areas, which they claimed were based on their own unique entrepreneurial vision and also on the local community's needs.

4.1.1. Age group catered, duration and regularity of attendance

The majority of preschools (80%) admit children in the age group of 2-5 years, while some of them (20%) admit children from the age group 4-5years. The demand for preschool education had another dimension. Although the pre-pre-school centers were for children between three and five years, most of the children who came were four or five years. So, It was expected by a researcher that the four-year-old would stay in preschool centers for two years. But it was found that a large proportion started moving to kindergartens in private schools after one year because parents were eager to give their admission to a higher education level school. If parents can see a higher-level school as an alternative, they think it is better and within reach, and they go for it.

Table 2. Age of children in the preschools

S.No	Age Group	Number of Preschools	Percentage (%)
1.	2-3 yrs.	-	-
2.	2-5 yrs.	8	80
3.	3-5 yrs.	2	20

Table 3. Duration of the preschool hours

S. No	Duration	Number of Respondents (18)	Percentage (%)
1.	2 hours	Nil	-
2.	3 hours	5	27.77
3.	4 hours	13	72.22

The working hour for the pre-primary section in a day is 4 hours for nearly three-fourths of the preschools (72.22%)and 3 hours for the remaining little more than one-fourth of the preschools (27.77%).

Table 4. Attendance of preschool children in the class

S. No	Response	Number of Respondents (18)	Percentage (%)
1.	Very Regular	Nil	-
2.	Regular	14	77.77
3.	Irregular	4	22.22

The majority of teacher respondents (77.77%) revealed that the children of pre-primary classes were regular in attendance. However, a few respondents of (22.22%) found them to be irregular.

4.2. Human infrastructure

4.2.1. Teachers

Teacher quality is the foremost important factor constituting 40 percent of the total effects on children learning (Leithwood, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In terms of academic qualifications, it was noticed that some of the teachers (38.8%) had an undergraduate degree, 50% of them possessed a graduate degree, and 11.11% possessed post graduate degree. With regard to professional training, a good number of teachers (83.33%) were professionally trained with either bachelor' Degree in Education(B.Ed.), Preschool Teacher Education(PSTE), or Diploma in Elementary Education(D.El.Ed). In comparison, a few (16.6%) were not having any professional training. Under the preschool teacher education program category, it was observed that teachers had done courses such as B.Ed. (Nursery), Nursery Teachers Training, Diploma in ECCE, and Certificate in ECCE. Further analysis of the professional qualifications indicates that some (20%) of the preschool teachers teaching in the preschools were ECCE trained. It was found that there was no Montessori-trained teacher in these preschools. This is despite the fact that there are some Montessori training institutions in Delhi.

As per the norms worked out by the Ministry of Women and Child (2013), the adult-child ratio should be 1:20 for 3-6-year-old children. It is clear from the data that many (80%) of preschools have a shortage of teachers as per the norm, while some preschools (20%) have sufficient teachers in terms of teacher: child ratio.

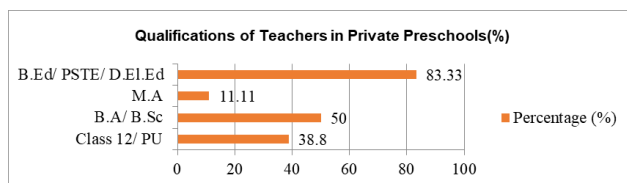


Figure 1. Educational and professional qualifications of teachers

Table 5. Shortage of Teachers as per Norm

S. No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	80
2.	No	20

4.2.2. Headmistress

In terms of academic qualifications (Figure 2), some of the headmistresses were graduates (50%), undergraduates (40%), and postgraduates (10%). Out of these, it was found that many possess professional qualifications (90%) like B.Ed, PSTE, and D.El.Ed. In 83 percent of these preschools, the headmistress was also teaching, perhaps leading to the saving in a salary of a teacher.

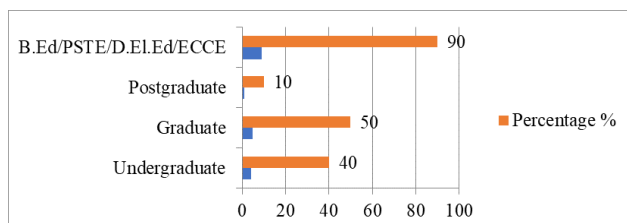


Figure 2. Educational and professional qualifications of head mistrest

4.3. Physical infrastructure

Room space and ambiance are an important conditions in providing a facilitating environment to the children all through the learning activities. In all of the cases, these preschools were a part of a residential building, and they were renovated to enhance their applicability as a preschool. However, the full applicability of these adaptive-reused buildings was a little doubtful. Observations with regard to the classroom space and density of children revealed in most preschools, the density of children in the classrooms was quite high. Furthermore, the playground was available in only 20% of these preschools. The teachers did point out that often due to less space, there is a big problem in conducting

indoor activities. Some of the teachers decorated the items inside the room in such a way that more and more space could be created. Some judiciously divided the class so that some children did activities inside the class and some outside it.

Table 6. Preschools with playground

S No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	20
2.	No	80

The data shows that a safe drinking water facility was available in all the preschools. There was no regular running water supply facility in some of the preschools (20%) under study. The water stored in the water tanks was being used in these preschools. Clean drinking water in covered utensils with a lid (20%), and water cleaned by RO/aqua guard (80%) is made available.

Table 7. Provision for periodical health check-up

S No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	70
2.	No	30

The Table shows that 70% of SBPPS conducted periodical health check-ups, and 30% of SBPPS had no such provision.

Table 8. Provision of meals in the preschools

S No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	--
2.	No	100

The data shows that meal provision is not made available in all the preschools (Table 8). During early childhood years, children learn another self-care skill that gives them more independence than any other skill. For toilet training, it is important that the preschools should have the availability of a proper toilet with regular water connectivity, which is either available in the form of running water supply (80%) or preschools water stored in the overhead tanks (20%). It's important that the children should not slip in the toilet, and it was noted that in most (90%) of the preschools, the toilet flooring was made up of non-

slip tiles. The dustbin was available within the toilet in many (80%) of them. All the toilets were found to be clean, dry ones with the drainage and hand towels/ tissue paper, and soap. Many of the preschool toilets (60%) have low-lying seats and use bright-colored walls, and some (52%) of them have low-lying wash basins and mirrors, too (Table 9).

Table 9. Toilet facilities

Proper toilet facilities in terms of:	Percentage (%)
Low-lying toilet seat	60
Low-level mirrors	52
Clean Toilets	100
Nonslip Flooring/Tiles	90
Dry toilets with drainage	100
Colors to brighten the walls	60%
Low-lying wash basins	52
Soap	100
Towel/Tissue Paper	100
Dustbins	80
Cleaning Attendant	20

4.4. Teaching learning strategies

It is learned from Table 10 that majority of the respondents, 72.22%, use both English and local dialect as a medium of instruction in the class, while 27.77% use only English as a medium of instruction. Cent percent of the respondents agree to the teaching of rhymes, storytelling, and conversation in the class. It is learned that at the initial stage of preschooling, the children are taught listening skills. They teach them rhymes and singing. Children are being taught to converse using simple sentences of telling their names, ages, and so on.

Teaching-learning is mostly playing way, and slowly, children are taught how to hold their pencils. The activities that involved the active participation of children were those that gave sufficient space to children in terms of choosing from available activities, materials, and experiences for substantial portions of the day. Active participation also involved meaningful, learner-centered experiences; opportunities to touch, feel, and experience; and also learn from mistakes, manipulate, and experiment; opportunities to ask questions, solve problems, and think independently. The active participation was also characterized by a range of expectations from all

children in terms of opportunities to make decisions and to be creative, and also to respect and trust.

Table 10. Teaching learning activities

Medium of instruction in the preschools		
S. No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Local Dialect	-
2.	English	27.77
3.	Both	72.22
The teaching of rhymes, storytelling, and conversation		
S. No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	100
2.	No	---
Availability of sufficient play materials/ Kits		
S. No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	83
2.	No	17
The teaching of alphabets, numbers, and creativity		
S. No	Response	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	100
2.	No	--

It was reported by the parents that by the end of the academic year, the children are able to tell their names, parents' names, siblings' names, etc. Children are also able to converse freely with their peers and are able to cope with the outside environment.

It is evident from Table 10 that 83% of preschools have play materials/ kits for private preschools. It is found out that all of the preschools have play materials like spike abacus, blocks, puzzles, swings /slides (indoor/outdoor), etc. However, it is learned that not all preschools make use of these play kits even if available, and in some instances, it creates problems among the children as the kits are not sufficient for the children. The kits also included books of rhymes, cartoons, poems, short stories, information booklets, moral stories, motivational stories, etc. The teachers narrated stories in the books and discussed them.

It was observed that the alphabet and numbers were also taught in some preschools (24%). Initially, alphabets and numbers were being taught verbally and also by showing through pictures and models. Then they are taught how to hold pencils and slowly do tracing works on dotted lines initially. In the

second year, most of the children are able to read and write the alphabet and numbers and do creative works like coloring.

All the preschools used charts and models and sometimes natural things that were available in the teaching-learning process. These were provided by the teacher themselves as well as the preschool authorities. The use of innovative arts and crafts for teaching/learning is the main focus of one of the activities in a day’s program in all the preschools. These activities such as doing paintings, theme-based activities, general discussion on a certain theme, poems, stories, role plays and drawings, etc. The teachers find it useful as it contributes to learning, as well as socialization among the children.

4.5. Parents and the preschools

The findings (figure 3) indicated differences in the opinion of parents regarding the meaning of preschool education. For more than one-third of the (35%) parents, preschool was the initial preparatory step towards formal primary schooling. They believed that children could easily get admission to a good school as they learned English in these small budget preschools, which was not happening in the preschool services provided by the government. Moreover, they also pointed out that the children do not face any problems in their primary schooling as they are already prepared. These results are similar to those of Denton et al. (2003) and also Kaushal, S (2016) as they reported that preschool education means developing early literacy skills among children, and further such, children gain proficiency in later grades. The practice adopted by these parents for choosing and also paying for early education points toward the instinctive trust of parents in the small budget private preschools based on their pre-supposed reputation. This may further help us to explain the growing shift of lower middle class and middle-class families to small-budget preschools, which is quite visible. These results are also in tune with the findings of Elliot (2004).

Few parents perceived preschools as a facility that helped in the socialization of children (7.33%) or learning in an interactive manner (10.33%). Since the recipient of this education were young children, therefore, it requires an open exchange of learning among the children and teachers to avoid boredom since children the ages 3 to 6 years are more active and love to be playful in everything they do. Some of the parents (42.67%) saw preschool education as a combination of all the above-mentioned different

aspects. However, a very small percentage (4.67%) never really had thought about the meaning of preschool education.

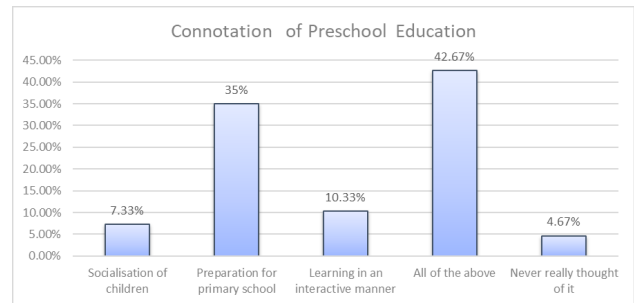


Figure 3. Connotation of preschool education to parents

4.5.1 Parents’ solidarity with the preschool

Many (94.44%) teacher respondents agreed to parents cooperating with the preschool authorities when called for, while only some (5.56%) disagreed with it. It is reported that parents rendered voluntary service when activities such as fairs and advocacy activities were conducted.

Table 11. Parents’ solidarity with SBPPS authorities

S.No	Response	Percentage
1.	Yes	94.44
2.	No	5.55

4.6. Smooth transition from preschool to primary school

Going from preschool to first grade poses new challenges for children, which they have to face, including a new environment, relationships, teachers, and new rules—all of which have been found to have an important impact on their attitudes and roles (Fabian and Dunlop, 2005; Perry et al., 2014; Salmi

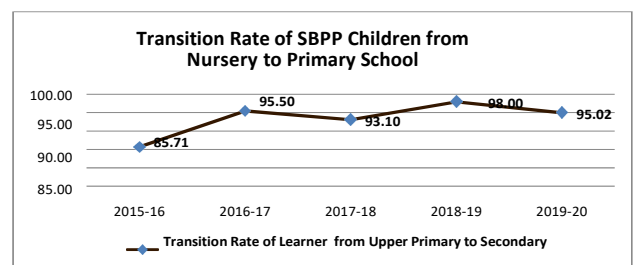


Figure 4. Transition rate of sbpps children from pre-nursery to primary level

and Kumpulainen, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2019). The data on transitions from small budget private preschools to the first grade of primary education was collected with the help of a questionnaire prepared by the researcher to assess the continuity of transition from preschool education to school.

On analyzing the transition rate of children from the SBPPS to primary schools for the last five years, it was noticed that there was an almost stable trend in the last four years, reaching 95.02 percent in 2019-20. The owners pointed out that these schools do face certain challenges. They need to have a robust vision and also good teachers. There is also a need for continuous teacher training to provide quality education. Because they target low-income populations, their fees are not always paid on time, impacting their working capital. As startups, they have to struggle and do cut down on expenses wherever they can

5. Conclusion

The preschool owner, in most of the cases, were female and were running preschools as an individual or as family initiatives. Most of them also did not have any prior background in education. The majority of preschool teachers in the preschools are not trained in this specific area of ECCE, although they possess degrees in Teacher Education and Diploma in Elementary Education, and so do many of the headmistresses. Therefore without cent percent trained teachers, quality ECCE cannot be achieved. Every employee of each category in an institution has a specific role to perform. For instance, for maintenance of a clean toilet, it is essential that there should be a full-time staff to keep them so. But this was found to be missing in most of the preschools. This problem directly or indirectly affects the quality of education as the teachers are overburdened with the other work besides discharging their duty of teaching.

We cannot expect effective teaching-learning outcomes as the learning at the foundational stage should be play-based which requires a variety of teaching-learning and play materials. In some of the SBPPS, the teaching-learning materials were insufficient. The children were made to learn 3 R's in some of these preschools. Instead, the practice should be to make Preschoolers learn "pre-skills," which lay down the foundation for the future. Through their playing, singing, and learning, preschoolers gain skills that ultimately help them learn to read, write, build their math and science skills, and become successful children. It is appreciable to note that many of the preschools were making the initiatives

towards the development of school readiness skills. Children learn some basics about formal schooling – like holding pencils, learning rhymes, and learning to mingle with the peer group and even learning alphabets and numbers, social skills and have a smooth to a formal primary school. As per data, most of the SBPPS under study were without a playground, and this is a hindrance to quality ECCE as learning at the foundational stage is mostly play-based. Networking with the community to avail of the facilities of the existing community resources can be of benefit in this case.

The preschools help children learn bowel and bladder control. Appropriately furnished toilets facilitate the development of autonomy in the children in this aspect. The visual experience of the overall cleanliness of the toilet also has the most significant impact on students' toilet behavior. Washing facilities and convenient handwashing also impact toilet use. So there is a need to improve considerably in terms of toilet facilities. It has been found that insufficient teaching staff is one of the main problems faced by the majority of preschools under study. Due to this, instead of taking separate classes for Lower Kinder Garten & Upper Kinder Garten were combined.

The parents connote these preschools as the initial preparatory step towards formal primary schooling, a place for the socialization of children (7.33%) or learning in an interactive manner (10.33%), and some of the parents (42.67%) saw preschool education as a combination of all the above mentioned different aspects. A few never really had thought about the meaning of preschool education. There is a misconception among parents that children need to study the medium of English in order to develop their English skills to an adequate level. Though parents feel that their children should learn to speak in English as they foresee it as a key to better opportunities for admission to a good formal school, Keeping in view the existing format of competitive schooling, the preschools have also become institutions in which the ambitions of the parents are being exhibited through the education of their children. It is good that a mixed medium of instruction was being resorted to in the SBPPS. It has been accentuated in the National Education Policy - 2020 that "a language does not need to be the medium of instruction for it to be taught and learned well". Another dimension to it is that there is a strong need to give recognition and equality in status to the languages and local dialect of India is crucial for ensuring a society that truly values and promotes diversity.

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