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## Awareness and utilization of non-formal preschool education component of integrated child development services scheme in Meghalaya

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### Abstract

This study examines the awareness and utilization of non-formal preschool education under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in Meghalaya, India. A total of 453 beneficiary mothers, 457 preschool children aged 3 to 6, and 210 Anganwadi workers were surveyed across seven districts. Findings reveal a high level of parental awareness (95%) regarding non-formal preschool education, though with a gap in understanding its structured curriculum in Anganwadi Centers (AWCs). Despite both supplementary food and preschool education being available at AWCs, 72% of parents opt for private nursery schools, indicating a preference for private preschools. Attendance issues in non-formal preschool education are noted, with some children attending private schools instead of AWCs. Additionally, while 64% of parents were neutral about AWC functioning, 26% were satisfied, and 10% expressed dissatisfaction. The study highlights the need for improving the quality and structure of preschool education under ICDS to better address the needs and preferences of parents and children in Meghalaya.

**Keywords:** Non-formal preschool education, integrated child development services (ICDS), Meghalaya, India

### Introduction

The early years of a child's life are pivotal for laying the foundation of their personality development. Recognizing this, preschool education plays a crucial role in fostering cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills essential for later life. With societal and economic shifts, there's an increasing demand for preschool education, especially with parents engaged in work or livelihood development pursuits. The Indian Government endeavors to provide early childhood education to all children, as mandated by the Constitution's Article 45. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme includes a significant component of non-formal preschool education, operating primarily through Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) in villages across the country.

Preschool education under the ICDS scheme aims to prepare children aged 3 to 5 + for formal education, focusing on intellectual, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development. Quality standards for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) are set by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, emphasizing factors such as duration, infrastructure, health, hygiene, staff training, and appropriate learning materials. However, despite recognition of the importance of ECCE, challenges persist in its effective implementation. This study focuses on assessing the awareness and utilization of this component in Meghalaya.

### Objectives

1. To examine the awareness and utilization levels of the non-formal preschool education components of ICDS among beneficiaries.
2. To explore parental perceptions regarding the role of Anganwadis in delivering preschool education.
3. To identify gaps and challenges faced by Anganwadi workers and helpers in implementing the preschool education component of the ICDS programme.

### Methods

The study was conducted across its seven districts, covering 21 ICDS blocks with three blocks per district. Through random sampling, data is being collected from 453 beneficiary mothers, 457 preschool children (ages 3 to 6), and 210 Anganwadi workers. Survey cum interview method was done.

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## Result and Discussion

### Awareness of Non-Formal Preschool Education

The success of any scheme largely depends upon understanding of the services provided by the beneficiaries

because rise in awareness and in-depth knowledge of a government programme by beneficiaries will increase in the utilization rates.

**Table 1:** Parental awareness about non-formal preschool education activities in AWCS

Sl. No.	Non-formal preschool education	Frequency N=453	percentage
1.	Aware	429	95.00
2.	Unaware	24	5.00

The table shows that 95% of parents were aware of non-formal preschool education, while 5% were unaware. However, upon further investigation, it was discovered that many parents only had a partial understanding of preschool education provided in Anganwadi Centers (AWCs). They mainly associated it with singing rhymes and playing, unaware of the structured play-based curriculum and planned readiness activities. The data suggests a high level of awareness among parents regarding non-formal preschool education, with 95% being aware of it. However, there seems

to be a gap in their understanding of the preschool education provided in Anganwadi Centers (AWCs). Many parents perceive it as primarily involving singing rhymes and playing, unaware of the comprehensive play-based curriculum and planned readiness activities. This highlights the need for increased education and awareness efforts among parents regarding the nature and benefits of preschool education offered in AWCs. Such efforts could help ensure that parents actively engage with and support their children's early learning experiences.

**Table 2:** Reasons of sending children to Anganwadi centers by parents' beneficiaries

Sl. No.	Reasons of sending their children to Anganwadi Centers	Frequency (N=453)	Percentage
1.	Both supplementary food and Preschool education	355	78
2.	Supplementary food	98	22

The data indicates that 78% of parents send their children to Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) to access both supplementary food and non-formal preschool education, while 22% send their children solely for supplementary food. This highlights the importance parents place on accessing both nutritional and educational support for their children through government programs like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). It underscores the multifaceted role AWCs play in addressing the holistic needs of children, including both their nutritional and educational requirements.

### Utilization of non-formal preschool education by beneficiaries

Attending school regularly is important for learning and growth of academic achievement. Researchers have shown that chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and first grade is associated with lower academic achievement in later grades (Blazer, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004)<sup>[1, 2, 8]</sup>, particularly for low-income children (Chang &

Romero, 2008)<sup>[2]</sup>. Chronic absenteeism in elementary school has been found to be predictive of chronic absenteeism in later grades (Blazer, 2011; Romero & Lee, 2007)<sup>[1, 7]</sup> and high school drop-out rates (Blazer, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002)<sup>[1, 3]</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary for schools to ensure that children attend classes regularly. The school should also ascertain the reasons for prolonged absence or irregularity and frame some strategies to help the students.

Maintaining teacher and child ratio is important in paying individual attention and to provide quality care and education. As per the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the prerequisite teacher-child ratio of children from 3 to 6 years is 1:25. However, the ICDS scheme has set a norm of enrollment of about 40 children in the age group of 3-5 years in the AWC for non-formal preschool activities due to financial limitations and the need for wide coverage of children (Manual on ICDS, 1984). Observations regarding enrollment range in the selected AWCs are presented in table (3).

**Table 3:** Distribution of preschool children enrollment in AWCs

Sl. No.	Preschool Children enrolled in AWCs	Frequency (N=210)	Percentage
1.	Upto 30	68	32
2.	31- 40	35	17
3.	41-108	107	51

The table reveals that 51% of Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) significantly surpassed the ICDS norms. Specifically, 32% of AWCs had preschool enrollments ranging from four to 30 children, while 16% had enrollments of 31 to 40 children. The average number of children enrolled at AWCs in this study was 44.8. These figures illustrate a wide variation in enrollment numbers across AWCs, with a considerable portion exceeding the expected norms.

### Preschool beneficiaries attending private nursery school and lower primary school

All parents want to educate their children in the best school that provides quality education of learning. Hoxby (2002)<sup>[4]</sup> found that there has been an increase in demand in school choice by parents for high quality of education. The following table (3) presents the beneficiaries attending Private nursery school other than AWCs.

**Table 4:** Beneficiaries 'children attending private nursery school and LP school

Sl. No.	Attend private nursery school or LP school	Frequency (N=453)	Percentage
1.	Yes	327	72
2.	No	126	28

The study reveals that 72% of parents choose to send their children to private nursery schools instead of relying solely on Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) for preschool education, while only 28% depend on AWCs. This suggests a significant preference for private preschools despite the availability of free education at AWCs. This trend is consistent with findings from previous research, such as Kular (2015) [5], which also highlighted dissatisfaction with the quality of preschool education provided by ICDS. Factors contributing to this preference for private preschools include the lack of age-specific divisions (pre-KG, LKG, UKG) in AWCs, irregular functioning of AWCs, poor teacher education quality, inadequate infrastructure. These findings underscore the need for improvements in the quality and structure of preschool education provided by ICDS to better meet the needs and preferences of parents and children.

The study highlights a concerning trend of unsatisfactory attendance in non-formal preschool education among beneficiaries. Despite good enrollment rates, many Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) recorded poor attendance during field surveys, with some centers even lacking preschool-aged

children. Surprisingly, even with prior notice, attendance remained inconsistent. Additionally, in some cases, children attended private nursery schools instead of AWCs, raising questions about the effectiveness of the non-formal preschool education program. These findings contradict previous evaluations in Meghalaya, where non-formal preschool attendance was reported at a much higher rate of 88.48% (Martin Luther Christian College, 2010) [6]. The study underscores the importance of addressing attendance issues in non-formal preschool education to ensure that children, particularly from low-income backgrounds, have access to consistent and quality early education, which is crucial for their long-term academic success.

#### Parental satisfaction about AWCS functioning

Parents are important stakeholders as they are the one who decides to send their children in AWC for availing ICDS components. Therefore, satisfactory level of parent will determine whether to send their children to AWCs or not. Table (5) depicts the parental satisfaction about AWCs functioning.

**Table 5:** Distribution of parental satisfaction about AWC functioning

Sl. No.	Level of satisfaction	Frequency (N=453)	Percentage
1.	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	292	64
2.	satisfactory	116	26
3.	Unsatisfactory	45	10

The table indicates that 64% of parents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the functioning of Anganwadi Centers (AWCs), expressing that having some form of education for their children was better than nothing. Meanwhile, 26% of parents were satisfied with the activities carried out by Anganwadi workers, while 10% expressed dissatisfaction. Interestingly, 72% of parents enrolled their children in nearby private nursery schools, while only 28% relied solely on AWCs for preschool education. This raises questions about why rural parents from low socio-economic backgrounds opt for private schools despite the availability of free public education.

#### Conclusion

The study on awareness and utilization of non-formal preschool education under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in Meghalaya reveals several key findings. Firstly, there is a high level of awareness among parents regarding non-formal preschool education, with 95% being aware of it. However, there exists a gap in their understanding of the preschool education provided in Anganwadi Centers (AWCs), with many parents perceiving it as primarily involving singing rhymes and playing rather than structured curriculum activities. Despite the availability of both supplementary food and preschool education at AWCs, 72% of parents choose to send their children to private nursery schools, indicating a significant preference for private preschools. Additionally, the study highlights concerns regarding unsatisfactory attendance in non-formal preschool education, with some children attending private nursery schools instead of AWCs. Furthermore, while 64% of parents were neutral about AWCs' functioning, 26% were satisfied, and 10% expressed dissatisfaction. Overall, the findings underscore the need for improving the quality and structure of preschool education provided by ICDS to better meet the needs and preferences of parents and children in Meghalaya.

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