

Catch them young: Working to build the human capital

The children aged three years are provided with some preschool services by the state. The ICDS programme commonly known as Anganwadi is today present in almost all villages. These centers have good infrastructures but they serve only the purpose of providing nutritional supplements. Parents of preschool children see the role of Anganwadi to remain limited to immunization and health care and providing children with mid day supplements. Such facilities are required by parents who hail from the lower income groups as many see such food supplements as subsidizing their cost on food. It is not that they are not in a position to feed. But when something freely is available why not take advantage. Pre schooling aspect has never been the priority and expectation that parents have from Anganwadi.

APM Terminal in order to ensure that these Anganwadi centers also provide preschool educational services roped in the expertise of an SWADEEP an organisation involved with similar efforts with other agencies in Gujarat. Swadeep developed an action program and with support from the ICDS office at the block level a program was developed to work on the pre schooling aspect of the children. Eleven Anganwadi centers from three villages were selected and the processes initiated for preschool education. At the beginning the baseline data obtained from the records of the Anganwadi showed that only 125 children (67 boys and 58



girls) came to these eleven centres. There were some apprehensions as regards to the cooperation that the project might receive from the first level human resources i.e. the Anganwadi workers. The project heavily depended on their acceptance of the roles. Many of them were tuned in for several years on doing the role of feeding the children and doing other administrative work assigned to them time to time by the state administration. However, to the surprise none of the workers showed any reluctance and realized that they can play these

roles without them becoming an extra burden to them. Since the programme did not expect paper work, maintaining of stocks and no reporting of performances, the workers were happy to play the roles. They on the contrary they found the roles interesting and brought them closer to the parents and the children.

Swadeep provided the needed inputs on pedagogy and worked in supporting the workers and mentored them. Meetings (22) were conducted by Swadeep with the parents and with village leaders. About 718 parents (repeat) attended these trainings. The workers saw increase in the number of children at their centers. All this happened as there was an increase in the level of interest in the parents. Parents saw that their wards were also inclined to attend the centers. The situation earlier was not the same. Children never liked going to these centers. But now with small little toys being made available in the centers, children found the centers having the environment that pulled them.

The children who come to the centers are today better dressed up. They have apart from being able to identify fruits, vegetables, birds, animals and many other such words, the identification of words from pictures which is a pedagogy that Swadeep goes with have helped. The plan for Swadeep is to help children learn over three hundred plus words by the time they are ready for admission to the primary schools. They will also probably be able to identify alphabets and also learn some numbers. Storytelling, songs, poems and play method is used by the workers to help the children learn. Almost at intervals of a month a half day pedagogy workshop is held at one of the centers where the workers gather and work on with the facilitators to learn the pedagogy. Till now seven such trainings of the Anganwadi workers and three trainings of the Anganwadi helpers (cooks) have been conducted. The training on nutrition was open to all and even the parents of the children attending the Anganwadi centers also came to attend.

With growing interest among parents to send their wards to private schools the efforts are being accepted by the community when they see that these centers also do the same as like any of the private nursery schools in their vicinity. However, the challenge continues as in most cases the Anganwadi women staff probably may need some incentivisation so that they also see doing such efforts adding to their personal well being. With expectations on the rise from the government to carry out different activities at the village level, these Anganwadi workers are expected to play multiple roles. The Anganwadi staffs in many ways are over burdened. In addition to these the paper work that the health administration expect them to play are also immense.

These centers have been performing in the area of primary education and the methodology adopted has helped the children coming to these centers enjoy the activities apart from learning. These children within the first six months of their being with the centers are able to identify more than one hundred pictures of animals, birds, fruits etc and are also able to do some very simple single digit calculations. There has also been some increased level of responses from the community. This can be seen in terms of increase in number of children coming to the centers. The baseline data revealed that the number of children now coming to the centers have almost doubled (from 125 to 306) during the last one year.



As an activity, probably the results \ impacts may be visible after a few years. These interventions show result in long term. However, the increase in number of children attending these centers is a clear indication that the community has understood the worth of these centers and the approach APM Terminals want to follow.

There was cooperation from the community and leadership in these villages. The administration saw that the village leadership also came forth in ensuring that the centers are open and serve the purpose of preschool education. With such promising and encouraging fall out APM Terminals is also planning to scale up this initiative to a few other locations.