

# Competencies Achieved by Students of an NGO-run Pre-school Program: The Case of SUROVI

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## Abstract

*The aim of the study was to evaluate the achievement of pre-school children participating in the program run by an NGO. The specific objectives of the study were three-fold; first, to provide an overview of the pre-school program of SUROVI; secondly, to assess the achievement of children in SUROVI Pre-school Education, which took the expected competencies of the new National Pre-primary Curriculum introduced in 2011 as the benchmark; and finally, to explore the teachers' views about the achievement of children. The study used a qualitative approach and was based on information gathered from a sample of 20 students who had completed the pre-primary course, 4 preschool teachers and 4 SUROVI schools located in Dhaka slums. It was found that all the children in the sample (100%) achieved the competencies in pre-mathematics. The score on physical and motor development was also high with 85% acquiring expected competencies. The scores for social and emotional development (55%), and environmental awareness (62.5%) were also relatively good. A disappointment was achievement in language and communication (45%), creative and aesthetic competencies (32.5%), science and technology (32.5%), and health and security (15%).*

*Based on data about student achievement, complemented by teachers' views and school visits, conclusions and recommendations were made.*

## 1. Introduction

The position of the country in the global economy depends on the competencies of its people and the foundation for these competences are laid early in the life of a child (Hurlock, 1994). Many psychologists have named early childhood the 'constructive period' of life. Klausmeier (1992) wrote that if children did not get appropriate stimuli, environment and guidance at this stage, this would have adverse effects on their development at later stages of life. A child's first eight years is a critical formative stage (Evans et al, 2000). The term *Early Childhood Education* highlights the cognitive dimensions of children's growth, such as

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learning through exploration and discovery, and school preparedness activities. Early childhood education is now recognized as a key component of basic education.

Bangladesh National Education Policy 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010) has affirmed the importance of pre-primary education and recommended its introduction in the country. The policy stated that its purpose is to protect the child rights, and develop fully child's cognitive, emotional and social potential. In a developing country like Bangladesh, pre-primary education can play an effective role to increase not only the enrollment rate but also the quality of primary education (Biswas, 2003). The Government of Bangladesh has included provisions for one year pre-primary education for children of 5-6 age to help prepare them for primary education, reduce dropout and address retention, attendance and enrolment problems in primary education (BNFE, 2009).

Children are more likely to attend pre-school, which in turn is an important determinant for better school performance (Aboud, , Hossain , O'Gara, 2008). Investment on young children has long term benefits. A World Bank (2000) survey showed that \$1 investment in ECE provided a return worth \$7 in social benefits. Student achievement relates not only to the intellectual capability of students, but also indicates the effectiveness of the school curriculum, performance of teachers and the administration. Assessment, therefore, plays a vital role in determining the effectiveness of an education program.

In Bangladesh, pre-primary education (PPE) is carried out by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and as private initiatives. NGOs generally provide pre-primary education for children of the poor and slum dwellers (Bangladesh ECD Network, 2010).

SUROVI, a non-governmental organization provides pre-primary education for disadvantaged children. SUROVI started its journey in education in 1979 with a program for children of the poorest families. Children of urban slums did not enroll in school because of their poverty, lack of motivation and not enough interest of parents regarding children's education ( Nahar, 2012). SUROVI designed non-formal pre-schools program for poor children in different areas in Dhaka city in order to enable underprivileged children to make a good start in basic education. The objective of the program was to prepare children for primary education so that they would fit into the primary school and perform well there. This was to be achieved by promoting physical, psychological, social, linguistic and emotional development of the children. It was a one-year curriculum for 5+ children. SUROVI attempted to create a joyful environment in the learning centers. The learning centers were adjacent to SUROVI's primary schools.

The present study was undertaken in 2012 to evaluate achievements of SUROVI pre-school children, which took as benchmark the designated competencies expected to be acquired by children in the national pre-primary curriculum, 2011 (NCTB 2011). It was also considered necessary to explore prevailing facilities and provisions in the learning centers of SUROVI

and potential obstacles to achieving required competencies by children. An in-depth look at pre-primary activities of SUROVI was expected to indicate necessary measures for improving NGO-supported pre-primary programs in urban slums of Dhaka.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

The general objective of the study, as noted above, was to evaluate student's achievement of SUROVI pre-school education program which was based on the terminal competencies of national pre-primary curriculum 2011. The specific objectives were three fold:

- i. To provide an overview of pre-school facilities and provisions of SUROVI;
- ii. To assess achievements of children in SUROVI pre-school education program; and
- iii. To know and understand the teachers' views about the achievement of children.

A mixed methodological approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods was used. Sample for the study was collected from SUROVI schools in Dhaka city. Among the thirteen schools of SUROVI in Dhaka city, four schools were purposefully selected from Adabar, Bouniadadh, Kamrangirchar, and Demra considering proximity and convenience. Five children who completed pre-primary class were chosen from each SUROVI school. A total of twenty children from four schools were selected randomly keeping gender balance for number of boys and girls. Four teachers from respective schools were selected for the study. A test was developed on the basis of terminal competencies covering eight learning domains of PPE curriculum 2011 for measuring student achievement (NCTB 2011). The test was administered by the researcher. A questionnaire was prepared to ascertain teachers' views through interview. Two observation checklists were constructed for gathering information about facilities provided in the SUROVI classrooms and their use by teachers. The researcher observed class activities at least two times in each center in a nonparticipant manner. Quantitative data as well as qualitative data were analyzed in line with research objectives and themes that emerged from the data.

### Measures and Testing Procedure

A test was developed to assess the skills of children who completed the pre-primary education recently. The test consisted of 16 items on the basis of the defined competencies in eight learning domains; namely, physical and motor development, language and communication, pre-mathematical abilities, social and emotional development, creative and aesthetic abilities, environmental awareness, science and technology knowledge, and health and security understanding. Each child was given a score -- high, medium or low, for each item based on the child's performance. The final version of the instrument was developed after a trial run of a draft version with a small sample. The test was administered through individual contact with each child in a quiet place at the school compound obtaining consent of class teachers and the children. On average it took 30 minutes to administer the test for assessing a child using different verbal and non-verbal measures.

### Characteristics of the participant

The selected twenty (20) children of SUROVI schools came from the urban slum areas. Their parents are mostly illiterate and working as factory laborers, rickshaw pullers, hawkers, taxi drivers, small traders etc. The average age of the children was six years and they had schooling experience of one year. The selected children at the time of testing had completed one-year pre-school and were in class one of SUROVI primary school.

**Table 1: The Study Participants and Methodology**

Sample	Size	Instrument	Techniques
Children	20	Test	Verbal and non-verbal measures
Teacher	4	Questionnaire	Interview
Pre-school	4	Checklist (2)	Observation of classroom practice and facilities

## 3. Findings of the Study

### Facilities of SUROVI pre-school program

The pre-school program of SUROVI was generally held at a room located close to where the potential learners from the slum neighborhoods lived. SUROVI carried out its programs in rented houses, identified with the help of the community.

The learning centers were generally a crowded place and often affected by noise pollution. The classrooms in terms of space, ventilation and light could not be considered ideal as learning environment for young children. A SUROVI classroom contained one door and two windows. The pre-school centers had sanitation facility but often not in satisfactory hygienic condition. There was electricity but not enough fans and lights. There were only one fan and one light for a room which was not sufficient for the size of the room. It was found that some of the children were suffering from cold, skin disease, and prickly heat, etc., but there was no attempt to identify and separate the children with health problems. No health-care worker or nurse was available to check on the children. SUROVI did not provide safe drinking water in the centers. Children were asked to bring drinking water from home.

It was observed that all centers had many different visual materials. The materials were hung on the wall from top to bottom. There were weather charts, posters containing rhymes, posters with names of members of the center management committee, children's hand imprint and photographs, posters containing names of 7 days of the week and 12 months, and charts with flora and fauna. Most of the posters were provided centrally by SUROVI. Some of them were made by teachers or trainers during refresher training. Some of the visual material displays were not of satisfactory quality or sufficiently attractive – with faded colors, and drawings and lettering of poor quality. The floors of the classroom were covered with a thin mat made of jute or plastic. It was used for students to sit down on the floor. There

were four corners in the room named 'Block and manipulative corner', 'Imaginative corner', 'water and sand corner' and 'art corner' for different activities. Play materials were gathered in a box or bowl and kept at the back of the room.

A blackboard was placed in front of the classroom and hung at a low height at the visual level of children as they sat on the floor. Pre-reading and writing materials such as story books, note books, pencil, chalk, duster, and pointer were kept on the table, shelf or bench in one corner of the room. There was a display board for displaying the drawings made by students.

The classroom was crowded with the number of children (1:30) in each, but there was not enough space to put necessary furniture in the room. It was observed that one table or shelf, a medium size steel box, a chair or a bench was in the room (size of the room was 120 sft. on average). All of the pre-primary centers conducted physical activities in the classroom; none had open playground. Some materials, for example; blackboard, display board, and chalk and duster were available in all pre-school centers of SUROVI. But equipment like fan, light, and furniture were inadequate in most of the centers. SUROVI used learning materials developed by a project supported with technical assistance of Plan Bangladesh (SUROVI 2005).

None of the centers in Dhaka city had any garden, a walled premise or an entrance gate. They were not attractive and clean places that one might associate with a learning venue for young children

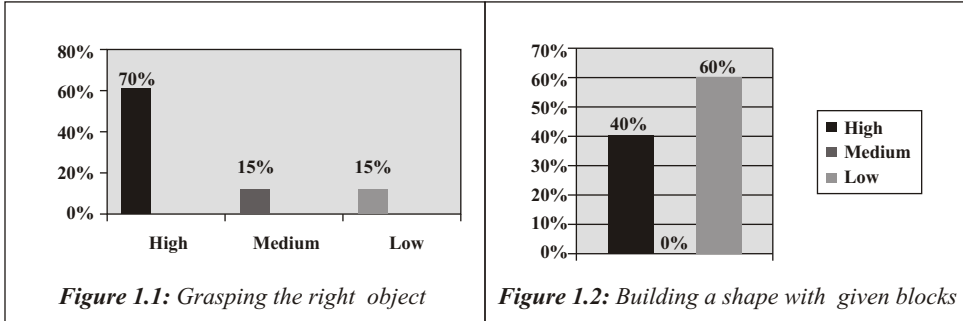
### **Children's Achievement of Competencies**

A selected sample of 20 children was administered the specially constructed test based on the prescribed competencies for preschoolers in the national pre-primary curriculum. The results of the test are described below.

### **Physical and Motor Development**

Children were asked to sort out objects in pictures demonstrated to them. Three objects such as banana, red chili and tamarind were shown. Each child was asked to grasp physically the sweet fruit from the given pictures. It was found that 70% of the children were able to give the correct answer, 15% were partially capable since they picked the right answer when they were given a second chance. The remaining 15% were unable to complete the task. In a second test item, students were asked to build a shape with given blocks. In this case all students (100%) were successful, constructing a shape according to instruction.

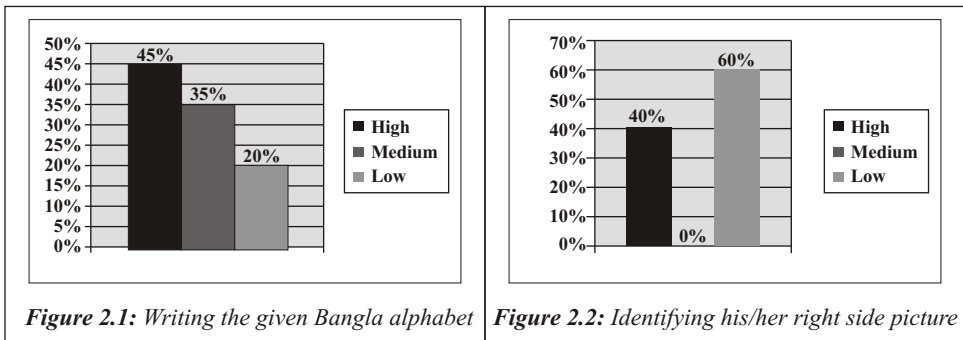
**Figure 1: Scores on physical and motor abilities**



**Language and Communication**

Two items under this category consisted of writing Bangla alphabet when the character was called out and they were to identify a picture on the right side of the learner when asked to do so. Among the twenty children, 45% (n 9) wrote the alphabet character correctly and 35% (n 7) made some mistakes in writing the character. The remaining 20% (n 4) were not able to write the character. Forty percent (n8) children identified the picture on their right side correctly, while 60% (n 12) did not succeed.

**Figure 2: Scores on language and communication**



**Competency in Pre-mathematics**

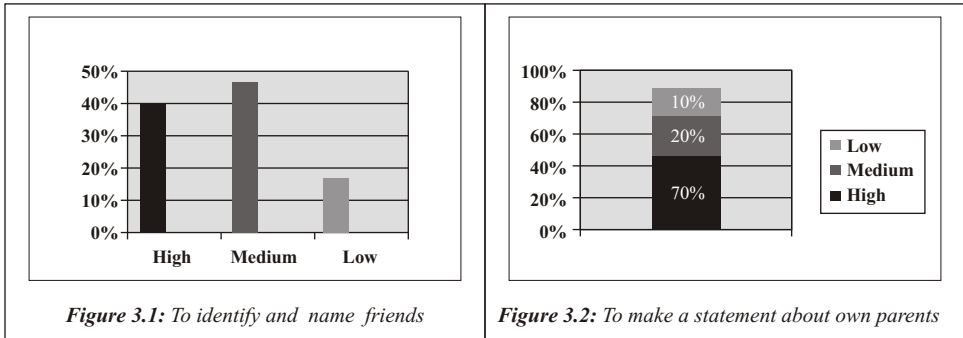
Students were asked to compare between two things in terms of quantity and size. It was found that all in the sample ( n 20) identified the differences successfully.

**Social and Emotional Development**

Children were asked about the names of their friends and to say something (make a descriptive statement) about their parents. Forty percent (n 8) responded effectively to the first question, 45% (n9) were confused in their responses and 15% (n3) did not answer.

Spontaneous participation of children was expected on the question about their parents. Seventy percent (n14) offered meaningful statements, 20% (n 4) provided partially meaningful statements, and 10% (n 2) did not give any coherent information about their parents.

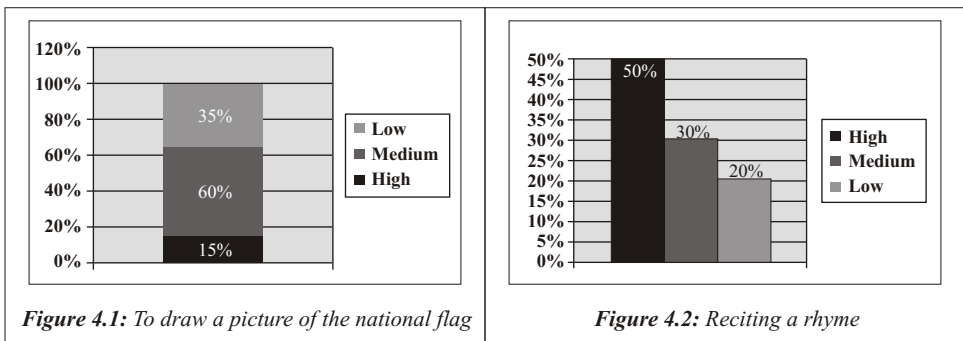
**Figure 3: Scores on social and emotional development**



**Creative and Aesthetic Abilities**

Students were supplied with some paper and color pencil and asked to draw a picture of the national flag. Fifteen percent (n3) drew the flag correctly; 50% (n10) made some mistakes; and 35% (n7) did not draw anything. Another item was about ‘reciting a rhyme’. Fifty percent (n10) were able to recite a rhyme spontaneously, 30% (n6) responded with hesitation, made some mistakes and took a longer time; while 20% (n 4) did not respond.

**Figure 4: Scores on creative and aesthetic abilities**

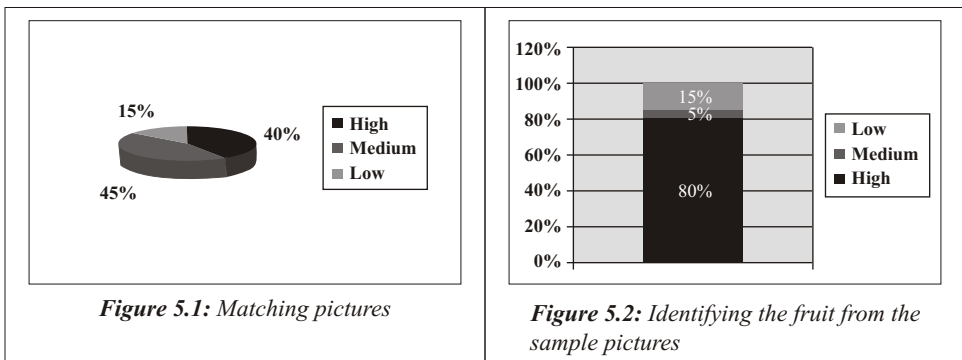


**Competency about Environment**

Children were asked to match pictures that demonstrated their awareness about relationships between physical objects and identifying a category out of assorted objects.

In matching, 45% (n9) matched three pictures, the maximum expected; 40% (n8) matched one or two pictures; and 15% (n3) did not match any. In identifying an indicated object (a fruit) from a picture, 80 % (n16) were successful; 15 % (n3) did not succeed; and 5% (n1) succeeded with additional time and instruction.

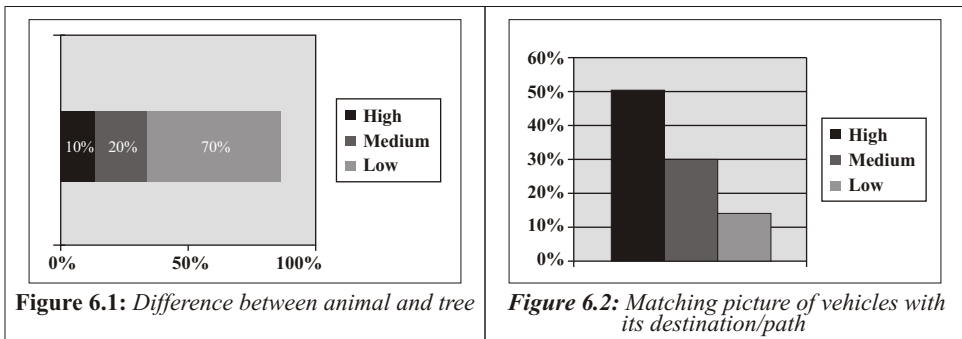
**Figure 5: Scores on environmental awareness**



**Competency in Science and Technology**

Children were required to respond verbally about the difference between animals and plants (i.e., a tree). Only 10% could offer a meaningful answer, 20% appeared to understand the difference but could not offer a coherent statement. Fourteen students or 70% did not seem to comprehend the question and did not provide an answer. The second item in this category was to match a vehicle with its direction of movement/destination from pictures. Among the respondents, 55 % (n11) were successful, 30% made some mistakes, and 15% (n3) failed to respond.

**Figure 6: Scores on science and technology competence**

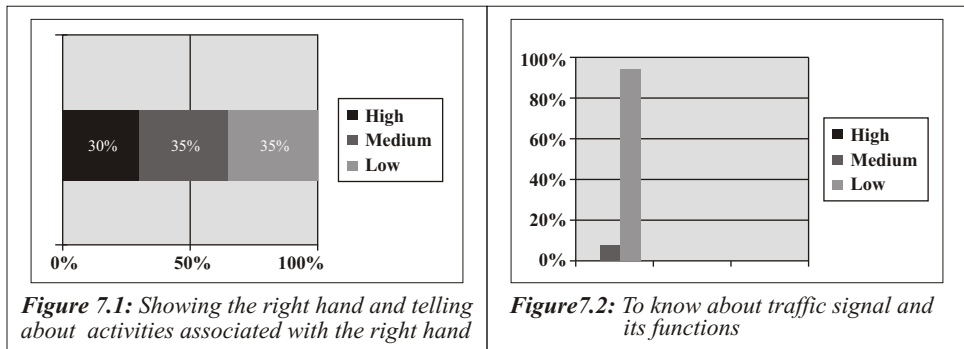




**Competency in Health and Security**

Children were required to answer questions about activities associated with right hand (health and hygiene related issues and common activities) and meaning of raised right hand for traffic signals. Thirty-five percent (n7) succeeded in answering the first question. Another 35% showed their right hands but could not indicate health and hygiene related and other activities associated with the right hand. Thirty percent (n6) did not give an answer. On the traffic signal question, it was found that 95% (n19) did not have a clear idea about traffic signals. This was somewhat surprising since the children lived in the metropolis. The five percent who had some idea about traffic signals could not answer the question about the significance of the signals.

**Figure 7: Scores on health and security knowledge**



**Teacher’s Views Regarding Classroom Practice and Children Achievement**

The teachers, four of whom were interviewed, had a wide range of academic qualifications - from grade 8 to masters’ degree. None had previous training in pre-school or primary education teaching when they joined the SUROVI program. They received some training after joining SUROVI. All belonged to the local community. All teachers were very happy to teach the children.

The teachers appeared to enjoy their work, were happy to be with their students and spend time in the classroom. They had a positive view about the children; they thought the students had potential which had to be nurtured and nourished. The classes had at least 24 students and their class attendance was high and regular. Teachers recognized the importance of motivating and encouraging children. They did so by praising student performance and participation in classroom activities.

Teachers made sure that the class collectively applauded individual or group performance regularly. Showing appreciation of others’ accomplishment and effort was inculcated as a norm. Bangla expressions ‘khub bhalo’, ‘khub shundor hoeche’, ‘chomotker’, ‘dhonnobad’

etc and English expressions ‘very good,’ ‘good,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘very nice’ were frequently and regularly used in the class. Conversation with teachers showed that different types of teaching-learning activities and strategies were employed in the classroom. These included - story-telling, acting, reciting, singing, role play, matching pairs, and games. These were organized through group work, pair work or as individual activity. Different types of posters, pictures, cards, were used by children and teachers in all classrooms. But the teachers felt strongly about the absence of outdoor facilities for children’s activities. The teachers were aware that the children came from urban slums with poor living accommodation; and that parents of the children were often illiterate. The teachers felt that the school and the teachers had to make an effort to compensate for lacks at home environment of children, but this was an uphill task.

The researcher was informed by teachers that children practiced physical activities and sang national anthem as part of daily routine for about 15 to 20 minutes every day. National days and events such as independence day, literacy day, national language martyr’s day, and victory day were celebrated every year in each center with children’s participation.

Different social and environmental issues as well as personal habits and behavior concerns were addressed by planning and involving children in activities like gardening, , washing hand before eating, washing hand after toilet, and keeping the classroom clean and orderly. Teeth and nails of children were checked in every center at least once a week. . Teachers expressed a commitment to the principle and practices of joyful learning and made an effort to abide by this commitment, despite the limitations in the school such as physical facilities, equipment and deficiencies in children’s home environment.

#### **4. Discussion of Findings**

It emerged from the findings that all the children (100%) gained competencies in the area of pre-mathematics; most of the children (85%) achieved the competency relating to physical and motor ability and 42.5% acquired competencies in language and communication. Besides 55%, 32.5%, 62.5%, 32.5% and 15% children respectively acquired competencies in social and emotional, creative and aesthetic, environment, science and technology, and health and security domains. Relatively poor performance in language and communication was a concern and perhaps indicative of the poor home and family background and environment that did not provide opportunities for children’s language development. About half or more students performing poorly in social and emotional, creative and aesthetic, science and technology, and health and security domains was also a concern. This outcome can be seen as a combination of home and family factors and the quality of learning design and experience offered in pre-schools. How effective the measuring tool consisting of two items under each domain and pitched at a simple and basic level for measuring outcomes was may also be debatable. It could be argued that the simple and basic content of the test items would have resulted in relatively higher scores. Therefore, the scores recorded were indicative of unacceptably low performance in most of the domains.

Teachers' responses suggested that pre-mathematics topics related to simple addition, subtraction, counting and quantitative comparison (less-more, smaller-larger etc.) were practiced in the classroom regularly. Teaching aids were used. Moreover, children were very interested in these simple reasoning exercises. It was observed that there were many teaching aids relating to mathematics used in the classroom.

Teachers reported, which was confirmed by classroom observation, that different types of activities related to physical and motor development, communication and language, and socio-emotional development had been practiced in the classroom through pair work, group work or whole class involvement. Teachers engaged children in activities by telling stories in their own words, reciting poems, singing, imitating animal (dog, bird, tiger, cat, etc.) sound, identifying first sound or letter of own name, and making words to enrich children's language and communication skills. Various social and cultural activities like dance, singing, poem recitation, storytelling, acting, and drawing were practiced in all the centers. It was found that a collection of different types of materials related to different learning contents was available in the classroom. However, it appeared that these were not sufficient in quantity, deficient in quality and frayed and unattractive to children.

Review of learning materials including guides for teachers suggested that several of the domains, such as, social and emotional, creative and aesthetic, health and hygiene and science and technology were not given sufficient attention and treated inadequately in respect of time allowed and learning activities suggested. The researcher thought that identifying competencies concerning these domains were inadequately emphasized in the SUROVI curriculum. Even in language and communication area, which received greater attention in the curriculum, the implementation of the curricular and learning activities was inadequate in the classroom.

Although the teachers did not specifically express grievances about remuneration and working conditions, in the researcher's view, the relatively low remuneration, absence of pre-service training and generally inadequate professional support and supervision resulted in insufficient motivation, and inadequate performance by teachers leading to poor learning outcomes of children.

## **5. Conclusions**

As noted, besides inadequate facilities and teaching-learning materials, crowded conditions, and less than ideal environment inside the classroom, outdoor facilities like playing field, garden, and veranda were not available in the schools. These circumstances severely constrained the teaching-learning process and the performance of students and teachers. In general, the centers looked shabby, unclean and generally unattractive with dirt and waste materials piling up in front of the premises. They matched the surrounding neighborhood of ramshackle dwellings, and potholed and mostly unpaved narrow streets. The centers failed to stand out as a place of joyful learning for children in a generally bleak environment.

The children came from poor slum dwellings which often lacked running water, electricity, and sanitation facilities. The parents were often illiterate or with very limited formal education and were not capable of guiding and helping students, though they wanted to do the best for their children. Children suffered from various seasonal diseases including respiratory infections, diarrhoea and skin conditions which affected children's school attendance and participation in learning. The schools did not provide any health care or referral service. The schools on the whole were not in a position to compensate for some of these deficiencies in the child's home environment. The school's main effort was concentrated on activities related to cognitive development, though even in this respect outcomes in language and communication area was not satisfactory.

## 6. Recommendations

In the light of the findings and discussion, a number of recommendations are made. It is clear that organizations like SUROVI and other NGOs, in carrying out their mission of serving disadvantaged children, face a basic dilemma. Given the large numbers of children in need and the limited capacity of NGOs to raise resources, they have to strike a balance between reaching out to the maximum numbers of children and ensuring essential quality standards in the programs. If a threshold of quality standards are not established and enforced, the efforts made and resources spent may be futile. Is something better than nothing? The answer is not an unqualified yes. The purposes of the services offered may not be served at all if a minimum acceptable quality standard is not established and maintained. For example, if after a year of participation in the pre-school program, the majority of children cannot demonstrate specified competencies in language and communication and social and emotional abilities, to what extent is it justified to devote resources and efforts to the program? Keeping these considerations in view, the following recommendations are made.

- Acceptable standards should be established for physical facilities, learning materials, necessary furniture and equipment and learning environment within the classroom as well as outside, including playground, garden, veranda, and sanitation and water provisions. These standards should be applied to new pre-school facilities. A time-bound plan should be formulated and implemented to improve the existing centers and reach the minimum established standards for facilities and premises.
- The neighborhood, municipal and city government and parents should be involved in making pre-school a clean, hygienic and attractive place in the community, a place of joyful learning for young children, in which the community takes pride and take initiative to look after these places.
- The curriculum, learning content and activities should be reviewed and evaluated with professional help in order to establish the balance between cognitive development objectives (including language and math) and other objectives. The logical link and allocation of learning time and effort between curricular objectives and learning activities should be reviewed periodically.

- A difficult issue is the extent the school can compensate for the impoverished conditions from which the children come. This is a concern that should be the priority of program designers and decision-makers. Major steps in this respect would include a closer communication and contact with parents (such as an orientation for parents and periodic meetings with them); an arrangement of health checkup of students and referral arrangement for specific conditions; and negotiation with municipal authorities for outdoor play ground, protection, cleanliness and upkeep of the center premises.
- Professional support, supervision, and remuneration of teachers should be reviewed and improved. While it may not be possible to make pre-service professional training a requirement, there should be a program of in-service professional upgrading, including, paid leave and support for participation in short courses and workshops.
- The implications for costs and resources for establishing and maintaining minimum quality standards must be considered in designing programs for pre-school education of children from impoverished background. Program costs and per child investment need to be critically examined in planning and implementing programs. The provision of minimum costs and expenditure at the cost of quality and results should be discouraged.

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