

SCHOOL READINESS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

School to home is the first transition in the life of a child. School readiness has gained significant attention globally in the past few decades. International frame works such as Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) promotes all children in developing countries should have minimum basic and primary education. Various research conducted explicitly says that quality early childhood education have concrete and long lasting impact on health care, cognitive and lifelong learning development. This paper is an attempt to explore broad concept of school readiness and concentrating on importance along with various researches of school readiness in India from the perspective of children with intellectual or cognitive disabilities as a component of early childhood care and education. India has 158.7 million (as per census, 2011) children between the age group of 0-6 years of age. School readiness strictly focuses on two basic features which are “transition” and “gaining competencies”. It can also be considered as viable strategy to bridge learning gap and full developmental potential among young children. Earlier children with disabilities collectively were not considered to be ready for school. Majority of research suggest the fact that children with mild intellectual disabilities can undertake and become part of regular school. School readiness in its new perspective is “*goodness of fit*” between child and environment which supports optimal development

Keywords-School Readiness, Globally, Cognitive Disabilities, Transition

INTRODUCTION

The Indian tradition strongly encourages appreciating the formative years of a child's life and a rich heritage of customs for fostering development, instilling moral principles, and fostering social skills in children still there have been changes in the family and its social context in the last few decades. However importance of early years in life has been acknowledged across the world. Coming from the social model of disability, inclusion promotes the responsibility of schools to adapt and provide accommodations for students with a range of learning requirements (Lindsay, 2007).

School readiness is about child's readiness to enter into formal schooling. School readiness refers to a process of estimating that whether a child has essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are thought to be important in order to succeed in school as well as later in life. There are multiple and interrelated dimensions to school readiness, emphasizing the physical, cognitive, social, language, and emotional domains. Dockett and Perry (2009) highlighted that almost always there is a perception that readiness for school means that the characteristics of individual children have to be assessed against some set standard expectations.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Missal (2012) conducted a survey study on school readiness skills among the pre-schoolers in the community and determined the percentage of the children under various level of school readiness. A sample of 100 pre-schoolers between the ages group of 3 to 5 years was selected. The early development inventory (EDI) which is a developmental questionnaire was completed after interviewing the teacher about each child in the class. The analysis of EDI showed that 57% were school ready, 23% were vulnerable and 20% were at risk. The author summarised that 57% met the criteria for school readiness while 43 % were not ready for formal schooling.

Linder (2013) presented outcomes from a literature review on studies that assessed the analytical factors of school readiness in mathematics and literacy. It was mentioned in the

research analysis that certain factors are associated with school readiness which is child care experience, family structure, parenting, home environment and learning-related abilities and many more factors. Certain risk factors were also drawn from this meta-analysis which was low birth weight, prematurity, or general health problems, and socio-demographics variables such as gender where boys struggle more than girls.

Lynch and Soni (2021) mentioned that in recent years, school readiness has become increasingly popular among early childhood researchers resulting in a lack of agreement on how it should be conceptualized and assessed, particularly in relation to children with disabilities. Evidence from the review exhibited that there are few assessment instruments that covers the relative aspects of children's early learning and development, such as their linguistic and cultural diversity. The present study is to propose a holistic model of school readiness that can be used to help us to understand the transition of children with disabilities into primary education.

Nair et al. (2023) conducted a study which was intended to narrate the concept and dimensions of school readiness for under 5 years for which extensive narrative review of literature was done. The present paper also aims at identifying barriers and challenges for school readiness for children with disabilities. Elementary and primary education provides the bases for lifelong learning, vocational achievement, and economically independent Group. Over 90% of children with developmental disabilities belong to lower-middle-income countries. In comparison to children without disabilities, these kids are much less likely to have basic reading and mathematical skills, are more likely to have never attended school, and are more likely to have completed primary school. The study concluded by emphasizing the significant role of inter-disciplinary professionals among pediatric caregivers in promoting school readiness in partnership with the families and community where this child lives. Overall, the paper highlights the need for proper policy initiatives at the global and national levels to promote school readiness specifically for children under 5 years with developmental disabilities in LMICs, if the aspiration goal of inclusive education by 2030 under the SDGs is to be realized.

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL READINESS SKILLS

School readiness is a multifaceted and holistic concept, encompassing the physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills and competencies in children (Bhise and Sonawat, 2016).

Various research conducted have exhibited that 90% of brain development occurs by the age of 5 Years. Children also at this stage need to acquire pre academic skills which are essential for success in school related tasks such as reading, writing, computation and problem solving, school readiness, therefore has to take into consider pre-reading, writing & pre-computational skills. This proves that kind of input that the child receives during early years of development has impact on its life long. The National Educational Goals Panel has identified three major key areas children's readiness for school, school readiness for children and lastly family and community supporters and service that can children's readiness for school success.

Important Elements to be considered under school readiness for children with disabilities-

Physical health and development are the primary key contributors in the school readiness of a child. Several studies have focused on health such as nutrition, cognitive stimulation and home environment. However, majority of researches conducted for school preparedness among children with disabilities have emphasized upon training of social skills, writing skills, orientation and mobility etc. Social and emotional development, development of self-concept is extensively important aspects which needed to be well taken care off before formal schooling it becomes more crucial in case of children with developmental and sensory disabilities. Interaction with peers in the beginning has long term implication towards school adjustments. As previously mentioned, the present focus on children's academic readiness continues to overshadow the significance of social and emotional development for their school involvement and readiness. (Raver & Zigler, 1997). Language development and learning preferences like openness to learn, tendency of taking up challenges, persistence and imagination etc. This is also referred to as

‘socialisation of thought’. “The efficiency of the entire education system can be increased by improving children’s readiness to learn, resulting in less repetition and dropout” (UNESCO, 2015).

The term “**transition**” is often associated with conceptualizations school readiness as several meanings are associated with it depending upon setting/environment, psychosocial and cultural negotiations. Lot of school readiness activities are transition activities that is formal one to informal ones. Hence, the categories of activities selected should involve creative and conversation activities. Children with cognitive disabilities require multi-sensory experience and all the reading, writing, and arithmetic activities which can be introduced as to normal children.

There are various educational approaches linked with defining school readiness which have undergone shifts during recent years. Systems which are conventional and narrow only focused upon literacy and numeracy skills that would facilitate primary school learning. One should focus on indentifying the area of interest and try to develop those areas.

Social pedagogical approach stresses upon broader preparation for life other than school based curriculum (OECD 2006). In certain European Countries it is about promoting broader development of child at the same time supporting the families.

In broader frame work it is about readiness of mainly three dimensions, which are about readiness of children, readiness of family and readiness of school (Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman and Halko, 2004; UNICEF, 2012). Children readiness is about development of eagerness to learn, inculcating range of behaviours and competencies such as following direction, literacy, numeracy, working well with other children, engaging in activities etc.

Children who enter school at higher levels of readiness have higher earnings throughout their lives. They are also healthier and less likely to become involved with the criminal justice system” (CEA, 2015).

Disability specific readiness skills should be planned for every student so that each child can access the curricula and beginning of school's years is stress free.

Readiness for schools to be the hosts-

In India various schemes and legislation have laid the foundation of Inclusive education like centrally sponsored scheme Integrated Education for Disabled (IEDC), 1974 launched by Govt. of India, along with launch of Project Integrated Scheme for Disabled (PEID). This was first prominence milestone in India since 1970. The scheme was initiated by Department of social welfare and was later transferred to Department of Education. Therefore, above two schemes laid foundation of inclusive education in India. This scheme was to ensure the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools of country. Meaningful and quality education for these children was also a concern of the action plan covering the following levels of educational intervention.

- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) for the children between the age group of birth-6 years
- National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) will cover early identification and intervention of at risk children
- Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan earlier known as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) for children in the age group of 03-18 years.

The aim of schemes was to develop communication and daily living skills at functional level. Persons with Disability (equal opportunity, protection of rights and full participation), Act 1995, emphasized need for equal opportunities for persons with disability largely to meet the goal of Inclusive Education. Later on Right to Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rights of Persons with disability Act (RPWD), 2016 spells out goals for inclusion in terms of making education accessible for person with disabilities. As per UNESCO declaration “**Education for All**” yet it is not the easy task because nature and needs of disability varies as per the types of disability like sensory disability, locomotor and cognitive disabilities.

There are several considerations that school as an institution should keep in mind out of which the first one is school must be willing for such programmes as their own initiative secondly Schools must be conscious of their strengths and weaknesses in order to adapt the guidelines based on their institutional nature and characteristics. Readiness of school's dimension focuses on the school environment. These schools have reopened the doors of mainstream education of children with disabilities. It includes practices which fosters and supports a smooth transition for children to primary school and move ahead, it increase and promote learning for every student, bridging cultural gap between school and home. The school initiates step to judge the readiness of the institution in accepting the programme. Judging the readiness of the school and preparing it to accept such a programme is crucial to its success (Singal, 2006). Ready schools characteristically create continuity and maintain learning expectations for children between early learning and primary school environments. With respect to children with disabilities, ready schools adopt inclusive approaches in lieu of exclusionary educational practices and discriminatory attitudes. The dimension of "ready schools" often refers to the overall standard of the educational setting as demonstrated by elements like adequate learning time allotted in class, a sufficient quantity of learning resources like textbooks and teaching aids, and competent teachers.

Dimension of readiness of families' focuses upon parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning, development and transition to school. Parents are considered to be the first teacher of a child, and it's a fact that supportive parents and stimulating home environments have been shown to be among the sturdy predictors of school performance during primary school and beyond. Parents' educational goals, attitudes, belief and commitment are considered crucial for school success. Parents' sensitization ensuring timely enrolment for young children is an important aspect for successful school transition. Providing appropriate learning environment also means involving parents into learning process through various other co-curricular activities. All **three elements** of school readiness are vital and should be functional because it is period of transition and involves the interaction between child, family and school system.

Several studies have stated that children's participation in preschool (school readiness) and early primary grades are inconsistent and fluid, and does not necessarily follow the linear age-based trajectory prescribed by policy (RTE Act, 2009 and National ECCE Policy, 2013). By age 5, children's levels of preparation for school were, on average, much lower than anticipated. The majority of children attend low-quality institutions that don't use activities, resources, or approaches that are appropriate for their age.

India has 158.7 million children between the 0-6 years' age group (Census 2011) and the challenges of catering to this large segment of population for overall development of children in the country is given due concern. **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** encompasses the inseparable element of school readiness and early learning. Presently, Government-run Anganwadi centers and privately managed pre-schools are the two major models of early childhood education available. Only small segment access other options like other pre-schools run by NGO's and religious organization.

It can be extracted from literature review and general survey that quality of school readiness programme is compromised and varied in standard. In a study conducted for analysis the status of early childhood education and its impact study, described that 28% of total pre-school period contains no activities whereas only 9% of free time with no activities are estimated for private pre-schools. Private pre-schools spend 39% in formal teaching of 3R (reading, writing, arithmetic) whereas it is only 18% for Anganwadi centers. A longitudinal study revealed that curriculum at pre-primary level is across the nation is vastly unstructured and truly did not cater to required components of school readiness (Kaul, et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

Children with intellectual disability have limitation in academic skills due to poor memory, communication deficiency etc. Even they face difficulty to perform their day to day life activities such as toileting, bathing, eating, grooming etc. Readiness in the child is a holistic term it includes physical well being and motor development including health

status, growth and disability. Farran and Shonkoff (1994) has described in their study that children with disability are of two types normative and non-normative. Children falling under normative category have highly individualized and specific needs and include children having disabilities like autism, moderate to profound level of intellectual disabilities and sensory disabilities also. Finally, keeping in mind all the above aspects of school readiness certain principles must be followed which includes age appropriate teaching activity, emphasis on functional skill relevant to the child with disability. Indicators should be identified at grass root level which can track the effectiveness of school readiness. Secondly, schools should adopt the indicators formulated on the definition of school readiness. Government should also stimulate policies and schemes related to school readiness from time to time. Training activity must be relevant to the community environment surrounding of the child and lastly taking into account pre-requisite skills for learning new activities and tasks. Direct instructional approaches prove to be more proving to be more effective to perform the skills. Above all, services and support must be culturally and linguistically appropriate and sensitive to the needs of children with diverse learning needs. Early intervention, early childhood programs and pre schools programs are designed to train the children with disability to have sufficient independent functioning required for smooth functioning in daily living. In India, concrete steps have been taken to enhance school readiness skills and improve necessary competencies among children and it becomes more important to think and consider the school readiness skills of children with disabilities which should go hand in hand with their early intervention.

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