

School Readiness in India

Perspective, Initiatives, Practice and Approaches

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Abstract

School readiness over the last few decades is being globally treated as a significant component of Early Childhood Education (ECE). In India, it has set up its roots, starting from pledges in government documents, development and implementation of school readiness programmes, development of school readiness indicators, early learning indicators, school readiness assessment instruments and promoting researches in the area. This paper is a description of literature and research studies on school readiness in the global and the Indian context with an aim to explain the different perspectives in its understandings. It begins by tracing the development of school readiness concept, presenting the Indian scenario, reporting the ground reality, discussing the initiatives undertaken by the Government of India and suggesting approaches to ensure school readiness among children. Evidences from the literature and studies reveal that India has to go strategically, starting from ensuring the quality of pre-primary education for all children, providing early intervention, addressing diversity of children's background and their experiences as well as development and use of appropriate assessment of school readiness of children.

INTRODUCTION

School readiness is the foundation for ensuring quality and equity in access to education as well as improving the learning outcomes.

It has the capacity to promote enrolment, sustain attendance and increase retention rate of children in schools. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report (EFA GMR)–2015

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realised that, “the efficiency of the entire education system can be increased by improving children’s readiness to learn, resulting in less repetition and dropout” [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2015, p.47]. In this context, the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2012a, p.3) affirmed that school readiness is gaining global support as a viable means to help young children reach their full potential and engage them in lifelong learning. Recognising the need and significance of school readiness, the Council for Economic Advisers (CEA) Report: *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments*, released by the Executive Office of the President of the United States, reaffirmed that, “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, pp.4–5).

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness is a multifaceted and holistic concept, encompassing the physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills and competencies in children [Bhise and Sonawat, 2016; Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), 2004; Janus and Offord, 2007; Rhode Island Kid Count, 2005; UNESCO, 2006]. It is a measure how prepared a child is to succeed in school

physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Realising the importance of school and family in children’s holistic development and learning, school readiness is globally defined by three interlinked dimensions — (a) ready children (b) ready schools, and (c) ready families (Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman and Halko, 2004; UNICEF, 2012a). With this view, the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum Framework, developed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), also defined ‘school readiness’ as “making children ready, the school ready and the family ready to ensure required skills and competencies in children in all domains of development for their smooth transition from pre-school to primary school and also improving learning outcomes in primary and secondary school, both in terms of equity and performance”.

The curriculum further elucidated that “children, schools and families are considered ready when they have gained the competencies and skills required to interface with the other dimensions and support smooth transition of children from home to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centre and subsequently to primary school” (MWCD 2013a, p. 23). In this regard, the whole process includes children’s transition to school, school’s transition to accept new children in Grade I and the families’ transition to interact with the school and send their children to school regularly and on time (UNICEF 2012 a, p. 3).

INITIATIVES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

The significance and need of school readiness in India was recognised long back. Since then, many initiatives have been taken to ensure school readiness among children. The MWCD developed the National ECCE Curriculum Framework. It advocates that for the smooth transition of children from pre-primary to primary education, development of focused and more specific school readiness is necessary (MWCD 2013a). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009, has also directed the states under Section 11, Chapter III, that “with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education to all children till six years of age, the government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education” [Ministry of Law and Justice (MLJ), 2009]. In this endeavour, the Twelfth Five Year Plan says, “Every primary school would be facilitated to have a pre-primary section and provide pre-primary education with school readiness programme for at least one year to children in the age group of four to six years.” The plan is further committed to provide school readiness intervention to children aged 5+ years in pre-primary centres by ensuring additional and trained human resources, introduction

of a developmentally appropriate curriculum framework, use of local and culturally relevant play or activity materials, creating activity corners, creating local toy banks, and promoting joyful early learning approaches (Planning Commission, 2013). In this context, the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), MHRD (2013), recommended that the ECCE curriculum should be developmentally appropriate and have school readiness component, as learning at this stage should be in accordance with children’s interests and development priorities.

Also, with an aim to offer a framework for assessing the implementation of pre-primary programmes and supporting pre-primary centres as well as service providers in developing and maintaining quality programme for improving school readiness, the MWCD has developed Quality Standards for ECCE (MWCD 2013b). The key standards include interaction health, nutrition, personal care and routine, protective care and safety, infrastructure/physical environment, organisation and management, children experiences and learning opportunities, assessment and outcome measures, and managing to support quality system. As a concern towards ensuring quality pre-primary education in India, the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED), Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), has developed the Early Childhood Education Quality Assessment Scale (ECEQAS)

(AUD 2012). This tool is under field testing that can be adopted or adapted according to the context.

Recognising the significance of assessment and monitoring of children's readiness level, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in its National Plan of Action for Children-2005 stated, "Develop inbuilt mechanisms for monitoring the learning outcomes in children and undertake periodic assessment to ensure that all children acquire school readiness by the end of the programme".

ACTUAL SCENARIO

The impact of these initiatives is evident in terms of increased accessibility of pre-primary education for children in India, as indicated in subsequent National Survey Reports. The Seventh All India School Education Survey (7th AISES), conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), reported 4,93,700 pre-primary institutions in the country in 2000 (NCERT 2006, p. 6). It increased to 6,55,493 in 2009, as reported in the Eighth All India School Education Survey (8th AISES) (NCERT 2016, p. 40). Similarly, the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) in its survey reported that the percentage of primary schools with attached pre-primary section reached 14.27 in 2002-03 and 24.07 in 2015-16 (NUEPA, 2016, p. xv).

However, a vast majority of children in India are entering primary schools in Grade I without any experience in pre-primary education. Even if some of them do attend a pre-primary education programme, it is not always a quality programme in terms of content and process. Studies found that despite children participating in pre-primary programme, they are not developing adequate competencies because of low-quality programmes (Kaul, et al. 2014; NUEPA, 2014). As a result, children are entering schools without adequate readiness, with increasing risk of low learning achievement, behavioural problems, no enrolment, late school entry or dropout after Grade I or Grade V. This situation often contributes to low-wage jobs and unemployment (CDPHE and CDHS, 2004). Similar situation prevails in other parts of the world. Das, et al. (2008) reported that in five South Asian countries — India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan — only 26 per cent children in the pre-primary age group have access to school readiness programmes. Considering the situation, EFA GMR-2011 estimated that nearly 72 million children will remain out of school in 2015 (UNESCO, 2011), especially in developing countries. This situation is evident in the Eighth All India School Education Survey (8th AISES), which reported 3.58 per cent decrease in the total enrolment of children in primary schools as compared to the Seventh All India School Education

Survey (7th AISES) (NCERT 2016, p. 44). The National Survey Elementary Education in India: Analytical Tables 2015–16 indicated 84 per cent retention rate at the primary level. It means that about 16 per cent children, who were admitted in Grade I five years ago, couldn't continue and dropped out from the system before reaching Grade V (NUEPA, 2016, p. xv). However, from 2000–01 to 2014–15, the annual average dropout rate at the primary level was constantly declining (NUEPA, 2016, p. xvi); and children, were still at a risk restraining India from achieving the goal of universal retention at the primary level.

To achieve the goal of universal enrolment and retention, a number of comprehensive School Readiness Programmes (SRPs) were developed by various organisations, like M.S. University, Baroda (Mistry, Parekh and Mankodi, 1985) and NCERT (Soni, 1996) in India. These programmes aimed at reducing the problem by offering school readiness programmes at the end of pre-primary education and the beginning of Grade I. After a thorough citation of the above documents, it was found that these were developed by the M.S. University and the NCERT a few decades ago to serve the children, irrespective of the varied curricula in different schools and to decrease the dropout rate at the primary level. These documents were adequate for developing readiness among children but in the current scenario, where

the pre-primary curriculum has been altered drastically, these are found to be less relevant. Recently, the NCERT has developed school readiness programme, 'Little Steps' (Soni, 2005) and come up with books *Readiness Activities for the Beginners* – Vol. I and II (Soni, 2011). The Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) have developed readiness programmes for entry level children in Grade I with an inbuilt assessment system. These programmes are comprehensively designed to meet the demand of school readiness and prove to be an excellent intervention in the area. The focus is on reading, writing and number readiness. Moreover, the focus of these programmes is only on the school readiness of children. The other two components of school readiness i.e., school ready and family ready are left unaddressed.

Literature review and general survey in Indian schools also revealed that the quality of school readiness programme is compromised and varied in standard; however, the purpose is the same. There are variations in pre-primary curriculum, depending on the kind of schools viz. government, private and Non-government Organisations (NGOs). A longitudinal study revealed that pre-primary curriculum of most government pre-primary schools was unstructured and did not truly cater to the required components of school readiness. However, private pre-primary schools are conducting them but for short duration (Kaul, et al., 2014). Private

schools claim to have school readiness component in their curriculum. Interestingly, there is a variety in that also, as some of them follow a specific school readiness programme; some have a small component of it in the curriculum; while yet others have school readiness component throughout the curriculum, starting from 3+ years. Some schools organise school readiness activities throughout the year, some before the end of pre-primary education, while some at the beginning of Grade I. However, in 50 per cent pre-primary centres in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Assam, no readiness activity for reading, writing and number is conducted. As a result, such programmes do not ensure school readiness of children (Kaul, et al., 2014).

There is no systematic and objective-based uniform pattern of assessment of children in pre-primary schools (National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development [NIPCCD], 2012). Also, there is no provision of assessing the existing and increased school readiness level of children in all domains of development. Even the most reliable and valid School Readiness Instrument (SRI) for children, developed by the World Bank, India, in 2007 under the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Programme Evaluation Package (World Bank, 2007) assesses the level of school readiness of children in cognitive and language domains only.

It is also found that in most government schools, either there is

no pre-primary education or they have only one year of pre-primary education. Most private schools have at least two years of pre-primary education. There are also a few independent as well as private pre-primary schools. In general, elite private schools have good infrastructure facilities. However, most private schools that have mushroomed do not have adequate facilities required for pre-primary education. Most government schools are still struggling for pre-primary infrastructure.

The NIPCCD (2014), in a study, reported that government pre-primary buildings in Delhi are decaying and do not have adequate light and ventilation facility. Largely, the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) operate from single rooms in rented buildings (Dhingra and Sharma 2011; Dixit, et al., 2010; NIPCCD, 2012). Most of them have no outdoor space (NIPCCD, 2006; NIPCCD, 2011; NIPCCD, 2012; and Planning Commission, 2009), or if available, it is inadequate and without playing equipment. Schools are also facing the problem of teachers' shortage. Key positions such as Anganwadi workers, supervisors and child development project officers are vacant (NIPCCD, 2013). The UNESCO (2006) also reported language gap and inadequate learning material as the undermining factors of school readiness. This situation adversely affects the quality of school readiness programme, thus, producing children with low retention and high dropout rates.

Hence, considering the significance and holistic nature of school readiness, a few constant gaps are observed, which are critical and are required to be addressed on an urgent basis. These are the lack of:

- pre-primary education in all schools, especially in the government sector;
- national-level standard pattern of school readiness programme that is flexible enough to be contextualised and adapted by the implementers;
- development of need-based and school-specific school readiness programme that is evolved as per the resources available in the pre-primary school. Also, its alignment with the concept of school readiness as per the National ECCE Curriculum Framework, developed by the MWCD;
- coverage of components of school readiness (children, school and family) and all domains of development in the available school readiness programmes;
- appropriate provision for assessment of school readiness among children; and
- nationwide awareness and dialogue on school readiness.

APPROACHES TO ENSURE SCHOOL READINESS AMONG CHILDREN

It is visible that the Government of India along with other organisations has taken considerable efforts to enhance the level of school readiness among pre-primary children, thereby, ensuring their smooth transition from

pre-primary to primary education. However, evidences provided by national surveys and research studies conducted across the country indicate areas which need to be addressed on an urgent basis by acquiring the following approaches:

Ensuring Quality Pre-primary Education

The quality of pre-primary education makes a crucial difference to children's learning in early primary grades by improving their school readiness. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), participation in quality pre-primary education programmes contribute positively to children's development during the early years and provide foundation for school readiness (NAEYC, 2009a). Recent longitudinal research carried out on large samples in India has also confirmed the impact of quality pre-primary programme on children's level of school readiness during entry to primary school (Kaul, Chaudhary and Sharma, 2014). According to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia, U.S.A. (2007), quality pre-primary experience for 'at-risk' four-year-olds helps to prepare them for school with lasting benefits. The Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECED) and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (2015) reported that children with higher school readiness scores

at the age of five performed better in conceptual tasks in subsequent years. This early advantage persists even two years later when they are aged seven. Similarly, in Bangladesh, children attending high-quality rural pre-primary programme improved their literacy and numerical skills, enhancing their school readiness. They outperformed their peers in a control group by 58 per cent on a standardised test (UNESCO, 2011, p. 38).

Therefore, quality is a prerequisite to school readiness of children. It includes responsive, affectionate and readily available adult-child interactions, trained teachers/staff members, appropriate adult-children ratio, small class size, developmentally appropriate curriculum with learning experiences building on the prior experiences of children (NAEYC, 2009b; Pelletier and Corter, 2005; and UNICEF, 2012a), optimal learning environment (Pivik, 2012); classroom equipment or material to support children's active and thoughtful engagement with learning (NAEYC, 2009a), planning, assessment, record-keeping (Portugal and Gois, 2010), availability and use of books and material (Arnold, et al., 2008 p. 29) and adequate infrastructure, mainly indoor and outdoor space with proper light and ventilation. It is also important to organise comprehensive and intensive trainings for pre-primary teachers supported by regular refresher and orientation programmes, make pre-primary education mandatory in

all formal schools under all sectors, especially government-run, and increase expenditure on pre-primary education by assessing the cost of sustaining the quality of pre-primary education and enhancing financial allocation per child.

Early Intervention

Early intervention is crucial for children's cognitive, socio-emotional, language and physical development during the pre-primary years. It can have a strong influence on readiness, enrolment, progress and learning in primary schools, especially for the undeserved and disadvantaged children's later learning (UNESCO, 2015). In countries with low level of access to pre-primary education, UNICEF's school readiness interventions have had a profound effect on children (UNICEF, 2012b). Also, data from several developing countries show a strong association between early skills and high school completion. These results implicate school readiness interventions in sustained positive school achievement outcomes (Grantham-McGregor, et al., 2007). Nonoyama and Bredenberg (2009) in an intervention study found that children in the experimental group significantly outperformed those in the control group in the language test. The results of Getting Ready Intervention also found significant differences between treatment and control participants for certain interpersonal competencies (Sheridan, Knoche Edwards, Bovaird and Kupzyk, 2010).

For identifying the significance of school readiness interventions at an early stage, it is suggested that early school readiness intervention efforts should be employed as per the requirement. These interventions must be school-based, carefully designed, short-term, child-focused, culturally sensitive, relevant to children's family and social context, (Bhise and Sonawat, 2016; Grantham-McGregor, et al., 2007; NAEYC, 2009a), integrated (Kamel, 2006), directed by the child's interests and developmental priorities, pedagogically effective, low-cost, capable of being implemented in low-resource environments (Rao, 2010) and ensure to make children ready for schools (Arnold, 2008).

Addressing Diversity

Diversity in children's early life experiences, the wide variation in young children's development and learning (NAEYC, 1995), socio-economic status and childcare history are significantly related to their readiness to learn (Janus, 2001). In a study, Isaacs (2012) examined children's readiness for school at the age of five years by a simple comparison of the simulated effects of interventions and found a 27 per cent-point gap between poor and moderate/high-income group children. The findings suggested a diverse set of interventions to improve children's school readiness. He further reported that it is not poverty alone that places poor children at risk, but parent's low level

of education, higher rate of smoking, depression and lower parenting skills also harm them. Therefore, an indivisible aspect of education is vital to be considered while designing any programme or intervention.

APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL READINESS

Due to a variety of contributing factors, the magnitude of school readiness may also differ. However, the larger the gap at school entry, the harder it is to bridge. Then, it is essential to make wise investments at this stage. School readiness assessment can be an important signpost in this regard that can be done at the programme or individual level. Missal (2013) elucidated that initially, school readiness assessment has two purposes. One is to ensure that each child has skills for successful early school achievement, and second is to develop a comprehensive plan to evaluate and monitor children who are at a risk of school failure. Apart from this, it is proved to be an important instrument to establish a baseline and document the magnitude of the problem; understand and support children's development; assess the interventions or programmes that are most efficient, cost-effective and contextual for the target group; document and evaluate programme effectiveness and inform the policy dialogue for future planning (Naudeau, et al., 2011). UNESCO and UNICEF (2012. p. 40) affirmed that strengthening programming

is possible if a short but targeted assessment of the impact of school readiness programmes can be obtained. The information obtained through assessment helps in planning instructions for individual children (Early Education for All, 2006; and Garber, et al. 2007).

It is proposed that for assessment to be widely used, it must be valid, reliable, employ methods that are feasible, sustainable and reasonable with regard to duration, budget, manpower and children (Epstein, et al., 2004). However, school readiness assessments are administered at varied timings. Some are conducted around the time of school entry and some in Grade I (Early Education for All, 2006; UNESCO, 2006). Also, there is no best approach or tool for assessing school readiness as different purposes require different approaches.

Generally, children are tested through standardised assessment, norm-referenced assessment (formal) or by naturalistic assessment (informal or authentic). Assessing children's learning through informal methods include structured observations, portfolio analysis of individual or collaborative work, teacher and parent ratings of children's behaviour, structured activities, like tasks performed by them which demonstrate developmentally expected skills or behaviour (Epstein, et al., 2004, Garber et al. 2007; Maxwell and Clifford, 2004). Assessment can

also be conducted by using multiple assessment approaches and tools.

Besides this, there is no unified and consistent opinion among professionals about the entry level skills and competencies (Slentz, et al., 2008). Thus, to capture a child's relative preparedness for school, it is vital to measure his/her development outcomes in physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional domains (World Bank, 2012). During school readiness assessment, the factors which influence children such as the range and quality of their early life experiences, including family, community, pre-primary school, demography and socio-economic conditions, variation in their development and learning, appropriateness of school's expectations from children (McCain, et al., 2007; Rafeoth, et al., 2004), local education practices, socio-cultural context (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2008), school climate, teacher instructional methods and classroom environment (UNICEF, 2012b) also need to be considered. For getting a holistic outcome, it is best to gather assessment information from multiple sources, like teachers, families and children, which will be useful in understanding children's skills across various settings.

CONCLUSION

School readiness is not a new concept in India. For long, a number of initiatives have been taken to improve the learning level of children, promote

enrolment and enhance the retention rate, thereby, reducing dropout rate. Realising its impact on improving the education of young children, it is now drawing more attention. India has taken concrete steps towards improving school readiness skills and competencies in children through various initiatives. However, some gaps are yet to be filled. These are — lack of pre-primary education in all schools, national standard pattern of school readiness programme that covers different components of school readiness (children, school and family) and all domains of development, need-based school readiness programme, appropriate provision for assessment of school readiness among children

and nationwide awareness and dialogue on school readiness.

A few collective and concrete steps, if taken in a planned and coordinated way by the central government, using the available resources, might address these gaps. These could help improve the quality of pre-primary education, provide early interventions to children in need, consider the diversity of their background as well as their experiences, and develop and use appropriate assessment of school readiness. However, the assessment level of school readiness of children should not restrain them from primary school entry when they reach the legal chronological age of school entry.

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