

## **Awareness of Preschool Teachers in Kerala, India on Early identification of Special needs Children**

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### **Abstract**

Awareness of inclusive education in schools throughout the Indian subcontinent is still at the infancy stage. Educational institutions are somewhat sceptical about having both normal and special children studying in the same classroom. The inclusion of individual disabilities has been a societal challenge for research and practice. Early identification of special needs can help such children grow their potential along with their counterparts. As persons who are in constant contact with tiny tots, preschool teachers could help identify the developmental delays within the preschool stage itself if they have the knowledge and skills to do so. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the awareness of preschool teachers on the developmental delays of little children they come in contact with in preschools. The paper also provides a comparative picture of the awareness of preschool teachers in different types of preschools and with respect to the age and experience of teachers and put forward certain views that may assist in providing appropriate empowerment measures for preschool teachers to help inclusive education for individuals with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Inclusive classroom; developmental delay; learning disability; awareness; preschool teachers; Children with special needs

### **INTRODUCTION**

The early years of childhood represent a crucial window of opportunity for investments in skills or capabilities that can place children on the path to well-being in adulthood. The developmental process, in a small group of children, may not be normal as their developmental process has not been completed in time. They may not be able to perform their daily routine or act independently in the surroundings like their peers. The Census 2011 data shows that the prevalence of disabilities in our country has increased from 2.13 per cent to 2.21 per cent since the 2001 Census. In India, it is seen that 20.42 Lakhs children aged birth to 6 years are disabled and one in every 100 children in the age group birth to 6 years suffered from some type of developmental disability (Census, 2011). The situation is not different globally as according to the World Health Organization, over one billion people are estimated to experience disability. This corresponds to about 15 per cent of the world's population, with up to 190 million (3.8%) people aged 15 years and older having significant difficulties in functioning, often requiring health care services. Each child will have a unique developmental potential. Therefore, instead of ignoring them and admitting them to special schools, they should be considered differently abled and should be taken along with the other children in preschool activities.

The success of inclusive education depends on the early detection of special children and their needs leading to early intervention and training. The teachers are interacting with children next to their parents. Therefore, they need to have working knowledge either gained during pre-service or in-service teacher training for identifying special children with the help of experts /resource teachers or by themselves. The purpose of early identification is to determine which children have developmental difficulties that may become obstacles to their learning or may place such children at risk. Thus, there is an urgent and substantial need to identify as early as possible those young children in need of

services. Therefore, the caregivers and teachers need to be empowered to identify the children at an early stage itself.

Many recent studies have emphasised that preschool and elementary school teachers have not received sufficient input from empowerment programmes to teach children with disabilities (Bruns&Mogharberran, 2009; Fuchs, 2009-2010; Hamre, 2004; Martinez, 2003) and they do not have adequate knowledge and skills in handling inclusive classrooms (Batu, 2010; Crane-Mitchel & Hedge, 2007; Gok&Erbaş, 2011; Kargin, Acarlar, & Sucuoglu, 2006). As the pre-service teacher preparation programmes offer little to teachers to prepare them for identifying early disabilities (Dew-Hughes & Brayton, 1997; ; Jennings, 2007), there is concern about the inadequacy of teacher preparation in terms of meeting the educational needs of children with special needs (Fuchs, 2009-2010). Moreover, the teacher's insufficient skills and experiences with these children lead to a reluctance to accommodate children with disabilities in their classrooms (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Gemmel-Crosby & Hanzlik, 1994; Huang & Diamond, 2009). Teachers frequently report that they need more information and skills in areas such as developing IEPs, and assessing the children's progress, adapting and modifying the curriculum, encouraging all children to participate in academic activities, and dealing with behavioural problems in the classroom (Avramidis et al., 2000; Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scher, 1999; Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2003). Also, some studies focused on the importance of early intervention for the development of academic and social skills for promoting long-term educational and thereby individual success (Reynolds, Rolnick and Temple, 2014). Early identification and intervention of children with special educational needs are absolutely key: the earlier a problem is identified, the better the outcomes of intervention. Because learning is a cumulative process, difficulties found earlier on if not attended to, can have a cascading effect on the rest of a child's life. As stipulated by Reynolds, Rolnick and Temple (2014), early identification and intervention usually refer to finding emotional, intellectual, behavioural and mental health concerns at the earliest age they appear. These problems can emerge early in childhood and become progressively worse if not treated. Hence, identifying the above problems early can pave the way for children to get the support they need to experience successful futures both in and out of school.

To implement inclusive education in early childhood, researchers highlight the importance of empowering preschool teachers through pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes, teachers' awareness and attitudes (Galovic et al, 2014; Kraska and Boyle, 2014, Voss and Bufkin, 2011). However, the present pre-service and in-service programmes for preschool teachers in India do not have a common structure and these do not provide adequate professional training (Lai and Gill, 2011). A few international studies also critique the inadequate professional training, inappropriate straight-jacketed curricula, improper interactive methods, materials and supportive techniques provided in the teacher empowerment programmes (Rakap and Rakap, 2011; Burns et al, 2012; Sucuoglu et al, 2014). The following aspects have been mentioned by UNICEF (2017) in order to have an effective inclusive system:

- i. Commitment and investments from education ministries- it takes money and time to change the system
- ii. Support for teachers and students- teachers need training and guidance, and students need to be provided with services to overcome barriers to learning
- iii. Promotion of respect for diversity and inclusive learning- action is needed to challenge negative attitudes and prejudice against children with disabilities
- iv. High expectations of all students- teachers need to invest in and support all children
- v. Safe and inclusive environments- children cannot learn if they are frightened either of teachers or bullying from other children
- vi. Partnerships between parents, organisations of people with disabilities and schools- inclusive education will benefit from the widest possible experience and knowledge
- vii. Systems to monitor progress- it is vital to measure whether the situation is improving and if not, what further changes are needed.

The majority of these requirements are in the hands of teachers, which implies the readiness and attitude of teachers to bring desired changes towards inclusion.

It is most tangible for preschool teachers to identify the early warning signs that put young children at risk for learning disabilities and understanding normal developmental milestones helps with early diagnosis and intervention. Early intervention is considered to be the most important factor influencing long-term outcomes in children. Along with paediatricians and parents, it is the preschool teachers and helpers, who can and must play a role in early identification. Children with disabilities are enrolled in inclusive early childhood programs in which supports and services from professionals from varying fields, such as early childhood educators, special educators, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and others become essential (Bruder, 2010; Mc. William, 2010). Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013) examined the current skill levels of regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi, India to teach students with disabilities in inclusive education settings. They reported that nearly 70 per cent of the regular school teachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Further, 87 per cent of the teachers did not have access to support services in their classrooms (Cited in Sing, 2016). Educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is considered one of the better ways to provide education to the population in India (Shah, 2005, Shah et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, the present study takes up analysing the awareness of preschool teachers on the early identification of special needs children.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The following objectives have been set for the study.

1. To find out the awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of special needs children in Kerala.
2. To compare the awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of special needs children with respect to their (a) age, (b) experience and (c) type of school
3. To analyse the influence of (a) age, (b) experience and (c) type of school on the awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of special needs children

### **HYPOTHESES**

Based on the objectives, the following hypotheses were set:

1. There is a significant difference in the awareness of preschool teachers on selected aspects of the early identification of special needs children in Kerala.
2. There is a significant difference in the awareness of preschool teachers on the early identification of special needs children with respect to their (a) age, (b) experience and (c) type of school
3. There is a significant difference in the influence of (a) age, (b) experience and (c) type of school on the awareness of preschool teachers on awareness of special needs children

### **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

A cross-sectional survey design is employed to explore the awareness of preschool teachers on the early identification of special needs children in Kerala. The study compares the awareness of preschool teachers on the early identification of special needs children in Kerala with respect to the variables: age, experience and type of school.

The population is the preschool teachers of Kerala and the sample consists of 200 preschool teachers from different districts employed in preschools under the general education department of the Government of Kerala, private schools owned by NGOs and other agencies or individuals and anganwadis run by ICDS. The simple random sampling approach guided the selection of the samples. The primary data was collected through google forms using a self-administered awareness test from 210 respondents, stratified among five preschool teachers each employed in preschools under the general education department of the Government of Kerala, private schools owned by NGOs and other agencies or individuals and anganwadis run by ICDS from all the 14 districts. The details on their age, experience and qualifications were also collected.

The findings from the data are analyzed using percentages and ANOVA. The comparative influence of the variables: age, experience and type of school will be identified. The study used SPSS software for the analysis.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data obtained were tabulated and subjected to analysis. An objective-wise analysis is presented and interpreted with the help of tables and figures.

### 1. Awareness of preschool teachers on selected aspects of the early identification of special needs children in Kerala

The study has taken five aspects related to the identification of special needs children. These include the characteristics of different types of special needs children and the rules and other information regarding special needs children. These aspects formed the constructs of the items in the awareness test. Almost equal weightage was given to each construct and the total score was 40 points. Each multiple-choice question scored one point. The respondent has to select the most acceptable choice from the four options given. Google form was given to 210 respondents, of whom completed and submitted 200 answers were taken for the final sample. The teachers who scored 40% and above in the component constructs are detailed in Table 1 and described in Figure 1.

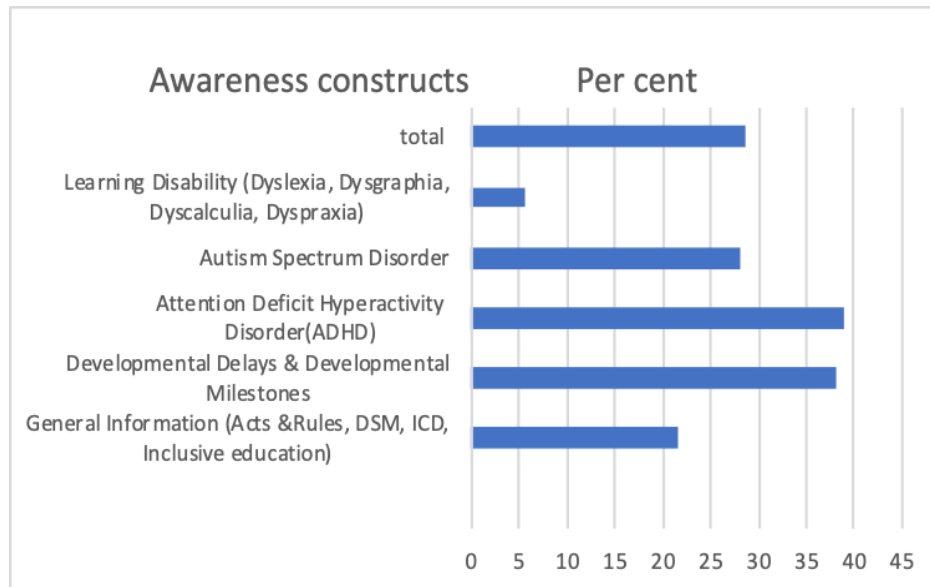
The distribution of respondents based on their scores in the awareness test shows 38 per cent of the teachers have given the right answers to at least four questions based on developmental delays and milestones in the awareness test. In the eight questions based on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) 39 per cent of teachers secured at least 3 points.

**Table:1**  
**Awareness of Preschool teachers in different Awareness constructs**

Awareness constructs	No.of items*Score (Max 40points )	Number (N=200)	Per cent
General Information (Acts & Rules, DSM, ICD, Inclusive education)	7x1=7 points	43	21.50
Developmental Delays & Developmental Milestones	10x1=10 points	76	38
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	8x1=8 points	78	39
Autism Spectrum Disorder	8x1=8 points	56	28
Learning Disability (Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia)	7x1=7 points	11	05.5
Total	40x1=40 points	57	28.5

The awareness of teachers in the Acts and Rules, DSM, ICD and Inclusive education was measured from seven items. In this 21.50 per cent (43 teachers) secured at least three points and the respondents who scored at least three points in the questions based on the construct, Autism Spectrum Disorder was 56(28%). The lowest score was for the awareness on learning disabilities measured by seven questions. Only 11 (5.5%) preschool teachers scored more than three points. On the whole, only 57 teachers scored more than 17 points as their total score. This shows the poor awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of special needs children, which they missed in gaining from their pre-service or in-service or the like empowerment programmes.

**Figure:1 Level of awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of CwSN**



**2. Comparison of awareness of preschool teachers on the early identification of special needs children with respect to the reference variables**

The study sought to compare the overall awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of special needs children with respect to certain demographic and reference variables such as age, experience and types of school. to examine the link awareness has been taken as the dependent variable and the select variables are considered as independent variables. The second hypothesis thus has been split to assess each comparison. The details of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

After estimating the mean scores of the awareness for each demographic and reference variable, ANOVA was used to compare the mean scores of awareness of each variable's respective groups. Results of ANOVA found that age, experience and the type of school showed significant differences at 0.01 level. The mean and standard deviation of the different age groups were found and from this, the age group 40-49 has the highest mean, which implies this group has the highest score on the awareness test, followed by the 30-39 group. The youngest among the respondents, the 20-29 group has the lowest awareness of early identification of CwSN and the 50+ age group is next to the lowest. Regarding experience, the mean score was increasing with experience. Those with less experience got low scores on the awareness test and those with more experience secured comparatively high scores in awareness. This result further stresses the result obtained for different age groups as those with experience of more than 15 years will be of the 35+ age group and they have a comparatively better score than those with less age and consequently lesser experience.

**Table 2: One-way ANOVA results of awareness of preschool teachers about select demographic /reference variables**

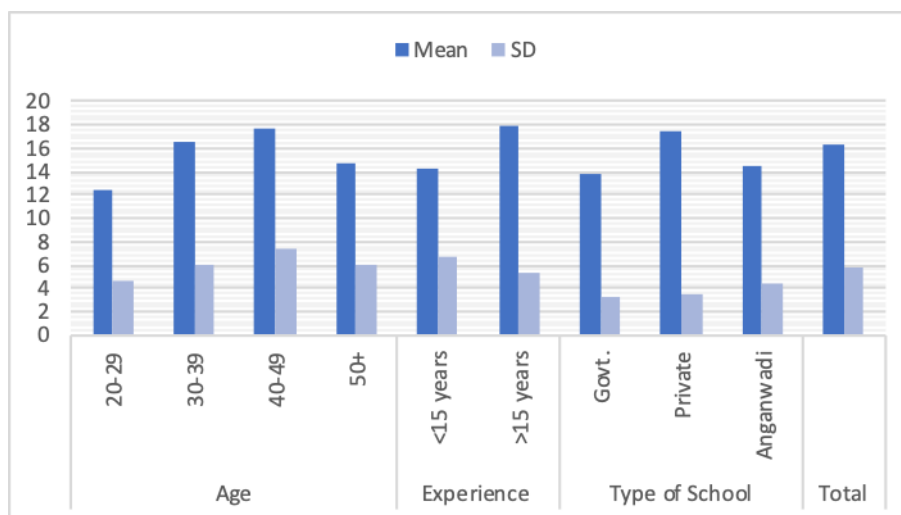
Variables	N	Mean	SD	SE	F	Df	P
<b>Age</b>	20-29	38	12.51	4.59	<b>5.833</b>	<b>3, 196</b>	<b>0.0008</b>
	30-39	68	16.52	6.11			
	40-49	63	17.62	7.32			
	50+	31	14.82	5.96			
<b>Experience</b>	<15 years	112	14.24	6.73	<b>17.029</b>	<b>1, 198</b>	<b>0.0001</b>

	>15 years	88	17.85	5.34	0.59			(P<.01) **
<b>Type of School</b>	Govt.	46	13.69	3.32	0.48	<b>8.626</b>	<b>2,197</b>	<b>0.0003</b> (P<.01) **
	Private	93	17.38	3.47	0.36			
	Anganwadi	61	14.49	4.36	0.56			
<b>Total</b>		<b>200</b>	<b>16.41</b>	<b>5.78</b>	<b>0.409</b>			

Source: Primary data(\*\*significant at 1%level)

However, in the case of the type of school, the teachers from private schools (Mean=17.38) showed comparatively high performance in the awareness test whereas those from Anganwadi (Mean=14.49) and government schools(13.69). this may be the reason why parents are attracted towards private schools even though they charge handsome fees for admitting students. Also, there is high competition due to the mushrooming effect of Montessori/Kindergarten and such types of play schools.

**Figure:2 Mean and SD of the independent variables' awareness of preschool teachers on early identification of CwSN**



### 3. Influence of Awareness on early identification of CwSN and Age:

ANOVA was used to compare the mean response of the preprimary teachers in the awareness test across the four age groups: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49 and 50+. As shown in Table2, the F value is 5.833and p-value (.0008) is less than 0.01 for the comparison of awareness score by age. The ANOVA results indicated that there is statistically significant variation in the in the awareness of preprimary school teachers across the age groups. This indicated that the awareness of preprimary school teachers on early identification of special needs children is influenced by age. The mean awareness scores for the age groups 30-39(16.52)and 40-49 (17.62 ) showed significant high values whereas it was comparatively low for 20-29 (12.51) and 50+ (14.82) age groups. This further shows that the middle aged teachers gathered awareness regarding CwSN from either teacher empowerment programmes they attended or from the compulsion of their environment going more and more inclusive admitting CwSN in normal schools. The beginners, in 20-29 age group showed the lowest mean score (12.51)indicating the lack of training they get from preservice education. This hints at the need for special efforts that should be taken while planning the curriculum to include the details of different types of special needs children and the way they are to be handled in the class. More importantly, the need for identifying such children who go unnoticed by their parents and healthcare givers lies in the hands of preschool teachers. Early diagnosis is more important than treatment. Only

field-based practices included in teacher training programmes for early childhood care and education could facilitate meaningful inclusion.

#### **4. Influence of Awareness on early identification of CwSN and Experience:**

ANOVA was used to compare the mean response of the preprimary teachers in the awareness test across the two experience groups: <15 and >15. As shown in Table 2, the F value is 17.029 and the p-value (.0001) is less than 0.01 for the comparison of awareness score by experience. The ANOVA results indicated that there is statistically significant variation in the awareness of preprimary school teachers across the experience groups. This indicated that the awareness of preprimary school teachers on early identification of special needs children is influenced by experience. This further shows that the middle-aged teachers with apparently more than 15 years of experience gathered awareness regarding CwSN from either teacher empowerment programmes they attended or from the compulsion of their environment going more and more inclusive admitting CwSN in normal schools. The beginners with less than 15 years of experience showed comparatively low mean score (12.51) indicating the lack of training they get from preservice education. This hints at the need for special efforts that should be taken while planning the curriculum to include the details of different types of special needs children and the way they are to be handled in the class.

#### **5. Influence of Awareness on early identification of CwSN and Type of School**

The sample respondents were preschool teachers from the government schools under the general education department of the Government of Kerala, private schools owned by NGOs and other agencies or individuals and anganwadis run by ICDS. ANOVA was used to compare the mean response of the preprimary teachers in the awareness test across the groups of preprimary school teachers from the three types of schools they represent: government, private and the Anganwadi. As shown in Table 2, the F value obtained was 8.626 and the p-value (.0003) was less than 0.01 for the comparison of awareness score by the type of school. The ANOVA results indicated that there is statistically significant variation in the awareness of preprimary school teachers across the type of school groups. This indicated that the awareness of preprimary school teachers on early identification of special needs children is influenced by the type of schools. The mean awareness scores for the type of school groups showed significantly high value for the private school (17.38) whereas it was comparatively low for government school teachers (13.69) and Anganwadi teachers (14.49). This further shows that the private school teachers gathered awareness regarding CwSN from either teacher empowerment programmes they attended or from the compulsion of their existence in such private schools as there is a lot of competition in the private sector. The comparatively low awareness of preschool teachers from government and schools and anganwadis indicates the lack of training they get from preservice education. This hints at the need for special efforts that should be taken to impart the details of different types of special needs children and the way they are to be handled in the class in the preservice training programmes. More importantly, the need for making the teachers aware of the importance of identifying such children who go unnoticed by their parents and healthcare givers and entering to be nurtured by preschool teachers as early diagnosis is more important than treatment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study analysed the level of knowledge and awareness of preschool teachers in preschools in the government sector, private sector and those under the social development department. In an attempt to find out the awareness of the sample respondents; acted for the study, an awareness test constructed and standardised for the purpose was used to assess teachers' awareness on early identification of special needs to enable meaningful inclusion. According to the first finding of the study, preschool teachers' awareness regarding the identification of special needs children in preschool classrooms is low. This may be because their level of knowledge concerning children with disabilities seemed insufficient, especially regarding the characteristics of different types of special needs children and the rules and other information regarding special needs children. This seems to support previous findings indicating that preschool teachers lack the necessary knowledge for teaching in inclusive classrooms (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2009; Crane-Mitchel & Hedge, 2007; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Gok & Erbaş, 2011; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). This finding supports the fact that in Kerala, preschool teachers are offered hardly any special education courses during pre-service education as per their curriculum. The

in-service programmes also are not much different. These courses do not concentrate on early identification but rather more on inclusive practices.

Children with disabilities have the right to be placed in regular classrooms. According to the most recent legal amendments, children who need special education services are placed in regular classrooms and provided with the necessary services and support in general preschool classes. In spite of all the problems and difficulties faced during the implementation of these practices, all concerned practitioners agree that inclusion is the preferred placement for children with disabilities. Therefore, teachers who are to work in preschools in the future should have the appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of all young children regardless of their characteristics or level of abilities. Therefore, both in-service and pre-service teachers should be provided with courses and training that focus on the acceptance of children with disabilities and should be given specific strategies to support them as they teach in inclusive classrooms. Another suggestion is that preschool teacher preparation programs should be reformulated in tune with New Education Policy (NEP)-2020 to offer unified programs that focus on preparing them to serve all children.

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