



## Quality of Early Childhood Education in Special Schools of Andhra Pradesh: A Survey

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) underpins the school readiness of children with special needs for formal education. This study is aimed at assessing the quality of ECE in special schools in AP. A 20-item questionnaire was administered on 58 special teachers to assess the quality of learning activities, teaching staff, environment, learning outcomes and parent's participation. The learning activities were excellent while quality of teaching staff was average in terms of remuneration and interest in teaching. Learning environment and Parents participation in school's management were good and average respectively. Based on the findings the overall quality of ECE was adequate for children with special needs. However, further steps need to be taken to achieve and maintain high quality ECE which acts as a bedrock in upgrading quality of life of children with special needs.

### KEYWORDS

Early childhood education, Quality, Children with special needs

### Introduction:

A quality Education is today's need as it aids in the development of intellectual skills and knowledge. Education provides people, the required knowledge, technique, skill and information ECE plays a crucial role in this context. ECE is important at early age up to eight years old which is a time of remarkable brain growth, and lays the foundation for subsequent learning and development (Angela, 2004).

The number of children in ECE programs continues to grow and many parents like the rich learning environment of a high-quality, developmentally appropriate ECE program. Brain research shows that children learn from the earliest moments of life, which is most rapid in the first five years (Begley, 2000). High-quality programs stimulate learning in this period. For this reason, children require ECE programs to provide safe and nurturing care in a developmentally appropriate setting. The fundamental changes in the economy of the country and its impact on family life have brought the ECE into the public forum (Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo, 2009). High quality early childhood programs teach children to think creatively so they may succeed in a complex and ever-changing world.

The early years are precious and critical in an individual's life because it is the time the foundation for adult development is being laid, it is important especially for children with special needs. It is because, children with special needs present with sensory or motor impairments which hinder their learning abilities. Attention to early childhood is a critical aspect of human development (UNICEF, 2002). According to Maduwesi, 1999, Ogunyemi, 2002, it is highly desirable that young children are given the opportunity to spend some hours in the pre-school setting with many facilities and qualified staff to enrich and stimulate them socially and intellectually.

Children with special needs not only require individualized instruction, but also understanding. This understanding at the very least requires a thorough expertise in educating students at various levels of cognitive and emotional abilities. Almost invariably, this knowledge of the challenges children with special needs face every day makes the teacher aware of how a student who is naturally at a disadvantage can be put in the best possible situation to succeed (Odom and Diamond, 1998). The teachers of children with special needs should gain the ability to advocate and facilitate community outreach for children and their families; develop an awareness of their professional role and skills to support families. Teachers and parents can work together to help improve the school environment.

The teachers should use their understanding of young children's characteristics and needs, and of multiple interacting influences on children's development and learning. They should support and empower families, and to involve all families in their child's development. All these can be achieved when the school management takes part in the process effectively by implementing training programs, resources and provides job satisfaction to the teachers. This ultimately works towards improving the quality of ECE.

Quality is a relatively value-based concept that is wholly constructed and subjective; hence there is no single model of ECE that is effective in all settings. Two principles characterize most attempts to define quality in education. The first identifies learner's cognitive development, and the second emphasizes education's role in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and in nurturing creative and emotional development (Grace, 2008).

Indicators of quality in ECE include learning activities, physical

environment, evaluation of children's progress, parent's participation, staff qualification, their work satisfaction, dedication of staff and parents. Assessment of these indicators is very important in order to determine the quality of education. Quality evaluation helps to determine effectiveness of the programme in helping children. Some of the NGOs and private organizations run these special schools for commercial purposes which contaminates the quality of ECE in special schools (Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo, 2009). Hence, there is a need to evaluate the quality of ECE programmes. This study is aimed at assessment of the ECE in special schools in AP to answer the questions regarding the quality of the programme.

#### Need for the study:

ECE acts as first steps toward formal education for children who are going to attend schools. Children who participate in these programs build confidence, competence and skills (Wishon, Huang, & Needham, 1987). Children with special needs with their constraints due to the presence of motor and sensory impairments require ECE to ready them for formal education for making the transition easier. For this to happen, the ECE programmes conducted in the schools should be structured in such a way that adequate resources and trained professionals are provided to provide quality services. It is necessary to determine their quality to take necessary measures if the quality is compromised. Factors which might affect the ECE are high student to teacher ratio, poor quality of teaching staff, inappropriate environment, inadequate assistive devices, inadequate physical facilities and non-commitment of the parents and teachers etc. These factors are to be evaluated and controlled to improve the ECE standards for children with special needs. This quality assessment reveals the lacunae in the schools which are affecting the quality of ECE in the special schools.

#### Aim of the study:

The present study focused on determining the quality of ECE at various special schools in AP, India using a 20-item structured questionnaire (Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo, 2009).

#### Method:

It is a descriptive research design of survey type, which aimed at assessing the quality of ECE in 12 randomly selected special schools and organizations in AP. Data was collected using a 20-item structured questionnaire (Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo, 2009) filled by teachers working in special schools (N=58). The selection of the school was by purposive random sampling and criteria for selection include presence of ECE.

#### Instrument:

The instrument tagged Quality Assessment Questionnaire (QAQ) (Olaleye, Florence and Omotayo, 2009) was used. A 20-item structured questionnaire with "agree" (high quality) and "disagree" (low quality) responses. The items were designed to elicit information on the various indices of quality identified by the researcher. The instrument was validated and found to have construct validity and with 0.76 internal consistency (co-efficient alpha) reliability. It has five parts; Part A to E, i.e. information on learning activities in the schools selected, school environment, quality of staff, assessment of learning outcomes and parent's participation respectively.

#### Results:

The obtained data was evaluated in terms of percentage of individuals agreed and disagreed on a particular item in each part of the questionnaire. Part-A, the quality of learning activities in the special schools showed that a high percentage of schools encouraged children to use mother tongue (98.3%), in developing linguistic skills (88%), learning good health habits and rudiment of numbers, letters, colors through play achieved a high quality score of 96.6% and 91.4%, where as opportunity to develop artistic and creative skills (70.7%) was found to be low when compared to other activities. These individual scores of the items revealed that the quality of learning activities in the special schools selected was averagely high.

The views on quality of Teaching Staff (PART-B) in the ECE programmes were found to be ranging from average to good. The individual scores of the items in Part-B are as follows, indicator of quality of professional qualification of teaching staff was found to be of average quality (70.7%), having a good knowledge of children development was 75.9%, where as re-training and self-development opportunities were good (88%). Interest in teaching the young ones and remuneration in terms of salary for teachers was revealed to be low (60.3%).

The learning environment of the special schools (PART-C) was good and provision of adequate classroom space and basic sanitation provisions were found to be fairly high (88%), playground equipment, materials provided and provision of water (84.5%) were of fine quality. The learning outcomes (PART-D) were of high quality with continuous assessment (84.5%), Records keeping (91.4%), parents having access to learning outcome (96.6%), rewarding for good performance (75.9%), except for assessment covering a broad range of children's activities (56.9%).

In the PART-E, it was reported that parent's involvement in academic activities such as field trips (72.4%), parents given adequate information about their children (75.9%), and organization of parent's forum (70.7%) was average. Parent's involvement in the management of the special schools (53.4%) and parent's financial support for the school (51.7%) was reported to be very low.

#### Discussion:

The overall quality of ECE programmes in special schools selected for the study in AP was found to be good. High quality was found in some aspects of the children's learning activities such as developing linguistic skills, use of mother-tongue, learning good health habits. The general quality of teaching staff was average. Some of the teachers employed were not trained to teach the children with special needs. Opportunities for development were good. The remuneration and benefits of the qualified teachers in selected schools were found to be inadequate.

The learning environment of the special schools selected was also found to be of high quality. Buildings and general surroundings of the schools were safe and conducive for learning and teaching. Some of the schools lack adequate playgrounds for the children. It is therefore imperative to provide quality learning environment for the young children in their schools (Evans, 2000).

The quality of learning-outcome was good with continuous assessments conducted in the schools, except for assessment covering a broad range of children's activities. Level of parent's participation in their children's education was average. The school management has sole control on the school activities limiting the parent's involvement in their children's education. Addressing the issues which are lacking in quality may help in closing the gaps and achieve greater equality in education is being sought worldwide. This is because High-quality early childhood education has the greatest positive effect on children from lower socioeconomic status, children who are at risk because of other circumstances, and children with special needs (Stegelin, 2004).

#### Conclusion:

It was concluded that the quality of ECE in AP State was good. The quality of learning activities was fair in the selected schools. The environment of the schools, the quality of learning outcomes and the quality of staff was good. However there was the neglect in terms of parent's participation which needs to be strengthened to further improve the quality of ECE.

#### Recommendations:

As ECE has shown to have positive effect on development of children with special needs. Hence, it should be of high qual-

ity. In order to have quality ECE programmes, trained special educators should be recruited, and infrastructure in the schools should be updated to enhance quality of ECE programmes. Parents and caregivers should be made a part in the ECE programmes.

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