

Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on School Preparedness of Pre-School Children in Kamrup District of Assam

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-school stage is most crucial as far as the primary education is concerned since children are made ready to entry in the first grade or class in the school of formal set up. Various studies conducted across the globe have categorically shown that pre-school education has a greater impact on one's lifelong learning. Pre-school education plays a crucial role to develop a child physically, socially, emotionally, mentally as well as psychologically. Adequate preparation at this stage helps the children to retain in the primary school. This leads to poor drop out in the schools. Preschool centers can be termed as home away from home for the children. It develops various skills such as personal discipline, punctuality, toilet habit, ability to work in group, rhyming, playing, dancing, singing etc.

Preschool education is very supportive especially for working women, low income family, families of disadvantaged communities. Developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructions help pre scholars to build foundation for learning smoothly at later stage. Preschool stage along with grades 1 and 2 is termed as foundational stage since children learn self in relation to others in this crucial stage of life in addition to early literacy & numeracy.

The Article 45 of the Indian Constitution retains ECE as a Directive Principle. It reads 'The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years.'

The Kothari Commission (1964-66) recommended activity-oriented and play-way curriculum for preschoolers. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF,2005) describes the early childhood stage as the most critical period when foundations are laid for lifelong development and realization of the child's full potential.

The Right to Education Act,2009 emphasized that quality preschool education should be given at pre-primary level. The Section 11 of Chapter 3 of RTE Act,2009 mandates for pre-school education as 'with a view to prepare children above the age of three years for elementary education and to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years, the appropriate government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education for every child.' The importance of Early Childhood Education has been given a significant importance in the New Education Policy,2020 of India. It has categorically mentioned that every child in the age of 3-6 years should have access to free, safe, high quality, developmentally appropriate care and education.

The 'Early Childhood Education Impact' study (2017) conducted by the Ambedkar University, New Delhi in three states namely Assam, Rajasthan and Telegana has showed that a significant proportion of

children in India, who completed pre-primary education, public or private, did not have the needed school readiness competencies when they have joined in primary schools. Devesh, Deepali (1990) in a study on 'Pre-school Children and their problems in rural areas of Kamrup District' had showed that poverty and apathy from parents have affected remarkably the growth and development of children in pre-school stage. Similarly, Kaul, Venita and et al (1992) in a study on 'Impact of ECE on retention of Primary grades' had observed that children with ECE experience were found to have a better retention rate in comparison to children who had direct entry in the schools.

In Assam, pre-school education is provided through three types of Institutions viz, Govt. schools having pre-primary section, Anganwadis and Private Schools. The Pre-primary class was introduced in all government primary schools vide notification of the Govt of Assam No. A(I) E.967/98/7, dated 11th January, 1999. The child at the age of 4+ is admitted in the Pre-primary class. The class is notified as 'Kaman Shreni' (known as Ka-sreni'). The Ka-sreni is running with the theme based curriculum, developed by SCERT, Assam. A Thematic Activity Book in 16 different themes and the workbooks namely 'Akonir Karmaputhi' and 'Beginners English' are developed by SCERT and are used for class-interaction with Ka-sreni learners. Similarly, the Private Institutions mainly follow Kindergarten and Montessori education while activities recommended in National ECCE policy are followed in Anganwadi Centers for Pre-schoolers.

Study of **Kaul, Ramachandran & Upadhyay, (1992)** revealed that children with ECE experience were found to have a better retention rate in comparison to children who had direct entry in the schools. However, the petrifying impact of Covid-19 pandemic and closure of schools on health issues had badly affected the learners specially the pre-schoolers. According to UNESCO (2020), nearly 90% of the world's student population-over 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries-have had their learning experiences disrupted by precautions and policies implemented to quell the spread of the disease. Worldwide, the Covid-19 had pushed the early childhood education system to the verge of collapse (NAEYC 2020; Zero to Three 2020). Study conducted by **Samagra Shiksha, Kamrup and MATRI**, a advocacy group of child right on Impact of Covid-19 on Children with focus on virtual education revealed that the pandemic situation had serious impacts on students' learning and mental wellbeing. **Janice H. Kim et al (2021)** in a study on the Implications of COVID-19 for Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia: Perspectives from Parents and Caregivers revealed that learning disruption due to COVID-19 school closures was likely to be substantial and would probably widen existing inequalities further.

The impact of Covid-19 at foundational stage of learning may have a long lasting consequence among children. The researcher had therefore made an effort to critically analyze the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on school preparedness of pre-school children in Kamrup district of Assam. The researcher, being an educational administrator of Kamrup district, had observed the issues from the core and hence, insights of the researcher through this investigation and findings would be useful for administration, educators and policy makers to address the gap arises due to impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Pre-school education. The study had been delimited to 10 government schools of Kamrup district, which is having substantial number of elementary schools with pre-primary enrolment, diverse communities & different geographical terrain (hill/char).

Operational definitions of the terms :

Effect : A change which is a result or consequence of an action or other cause or a cause (something) to happen. In this study effect is meant for changes occurred during Covid-19 pandemic situation.

Covid-19: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The virus can spread from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. These particles range from larger respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols.

Pandemic : An outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population : a pandemic outbreak of a disease.

School Preparedness : It refers to whether a child is ready to make an easy and successful transition into school to retain and learn as expected. It encompasses the child's orientation to go to school and to cope up with the situation that they face.

Pre-school : Relating to the time before a child is old enough to go to school. A preschool, also known as nursery school, pre-primary school, or play school, is an educational establishment or learning space offering early childhood education to children before they begin compulsory education at primary school.

Objectives of the study :

1. To study the Effect of Covid-19 pandemic on school preparedness of pre-school children in Kamrup district of Assam.
2. To find out the perception of teachers on effect of Covid-19 pandemic on school preparedness of pre-school children.
3. To become familiar with the gap and issues emerged in Pre-school education due to surge of Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions :

Following were the research questions to which the researcher wants to answer;

1. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected on school preparedness of pre-school children?
2. Has the Covid-19 pandemic widened the existing issues and gap in Pre-school Education?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Considering the nature of the research problem, the researchers had adopted descriptive survey method to carry out the study. The study is designed to obtain pertinent and precise information concerning the current status of phenomenon and draw a valid general conclusion from the facts identified. The population of the study was restricted to 10 Lower Primary schools of Kamrup district, out of which 10 teachers teaching at pre-primary level and the concerned Head Teachers were covered. Sample had been selected through simple random sampling method. Primary data was collected through two structured questionnaires, one for Ka-shreni teacher and the other for Head Teacher. Secondary information was collected from earlier researches, internet, reference book, offices and magazines etc. The field survey was conducted systematically & through online. Once the questionnaires were prepared, Google sheets were generated. Name and contact details of Head Teachers and Teachers concerned were collected from Block Offices of Samagra Shiksha and they were communicated in advance regarding the study. Thereafter, the questionnaires were communicated to the teachers and responses were collected from them.

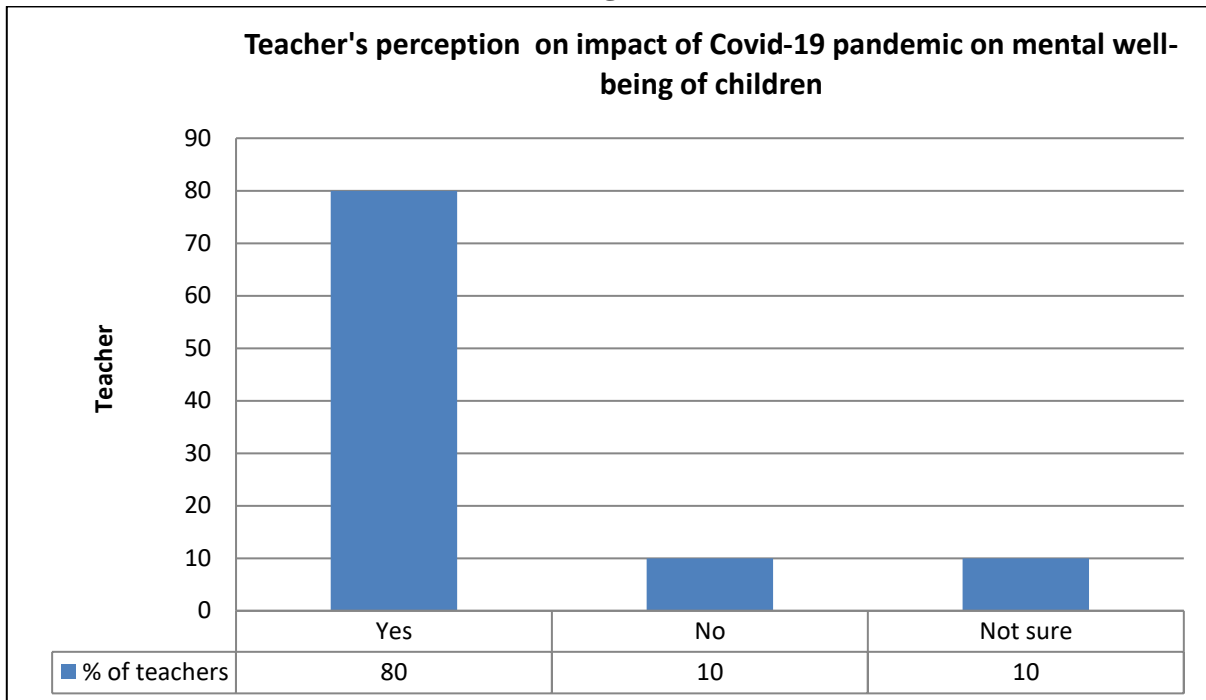
FINDINGS

The data gathered was carefully analysed in the light of set objectives and discussed with the help of percentages. Some previous reports were also consulted to analyse the data.

The findings of the study can be summarised as below:

1. Present study reveals that 80% of schools are having running water, 10% of schools having separate toilet for pre-schoolers, 50% of schools are having print-rich classroom, 60% of schools are having outdoor play materials for the pre-schoolers. 70% of teachers responded that children are brought to the outside of schools for leaning exposure.
2. This study shows that 90% of teachers are female while 10% are male, out of which, 40% of teachers are having training on Child Psychology, an essential qualifications to deal with the learning of children at pre-school level.
3. The researcher has found that the activities namely jumping, running, throwing ball into box, hide and seek game, dancing, drilling, crawling, playing with ball, various indigenous game, physical exercise, walking, jogging etc were conducted in school to bring about physical development of children.
4. The activities like self introduction, poem recitation, storytelling, creating storey by looking at picture, saying the difference between sounds, listen a story and understand it, puzzle solving, making word puzzle, conversation, communication, picture reading, rhyming, singing, talking with friends etc. were carried out by schools to bring about language development of children.
5. The schools carried out activities namely presentation of rhyming songs with expression, acting with dolls, poem recitation, group activity, expressing their thoughts, ideas, feelings in mother tongue or regional languages and gestures, playing with other friends, celebration of festivals, make friend and keep friendship, learn social norms and express, local area visit and interaction with people etc to bring about socio-emotional development of children.
6. Activities like thumb painting, painting with lady's finger, onion etc, making collage and colourful paper, doll making with clay, making flower with ink drop on paper, classroom decoration, arts & crafts activities, sound play, music and dance, drawing & painting, role playing, engage them with activity boxes etc carried out in schools to bring about creativity and aesthetic development in children.
7. It is opined by majority of the teachers that the Covid-19 pandemic has an effect on mental well-being of children. Under this study, 80% of the teachers have observed impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Children especially on mental wellbeing, while 10% of teachers have observed no such impact and 10% of teachers are not sure about it.

Fig:7

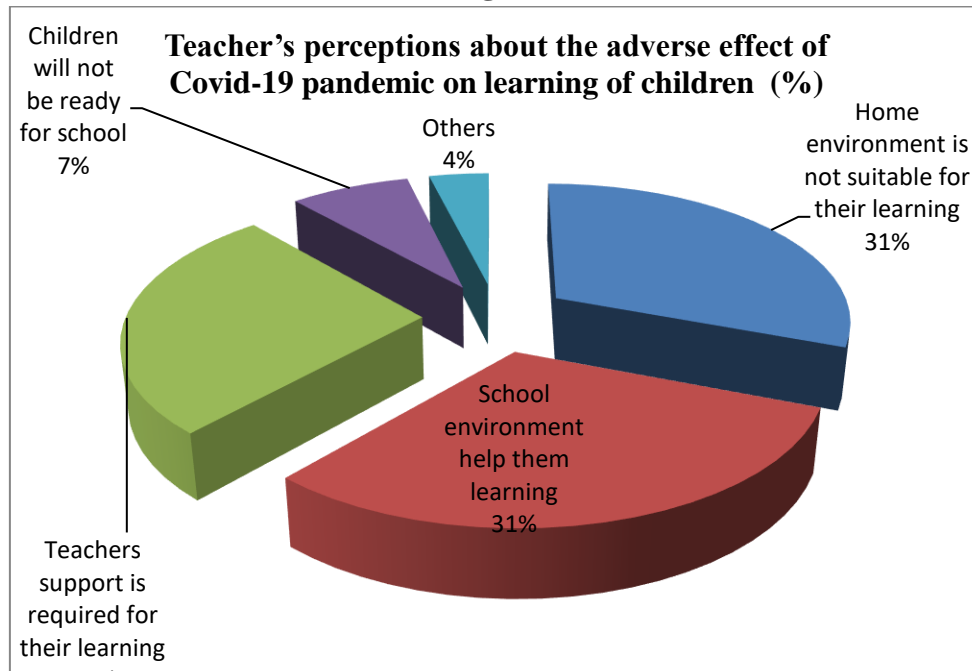


8. 80% of the teachers responded under this study have a perception that Covid-19 has an adverse effect on children’s learning while 10% of teachers are not sure about it.
9. This study shows that only 70% of teachers could communicate the children during pandemic while 20% of teachers could not communicate due to lack of means.
10. The present study shows that teachers were in contact, though not all, with parents of the children and shared various aspects of Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on child’s health and education. As responded, 70% of the teachers interacted with parents frequently during pandemic period while 10% of teachers had no communication with parents.
11. Teacher’s perceptions about the adverse effect of Covid-19 pandemic on learning of children :

Table:11

Teacher's perception	Frequency	Percentage
Home environment is not suitable for their learning	80	31
School environment help them learning	80	31
Teachers support is required for their learning	70	27
Children will not be ready for school	20	7
Others (Illiterate parents cannot provide support for learning at home. Poor parents cannot afford smartphone for students)	10	4

Fig:11

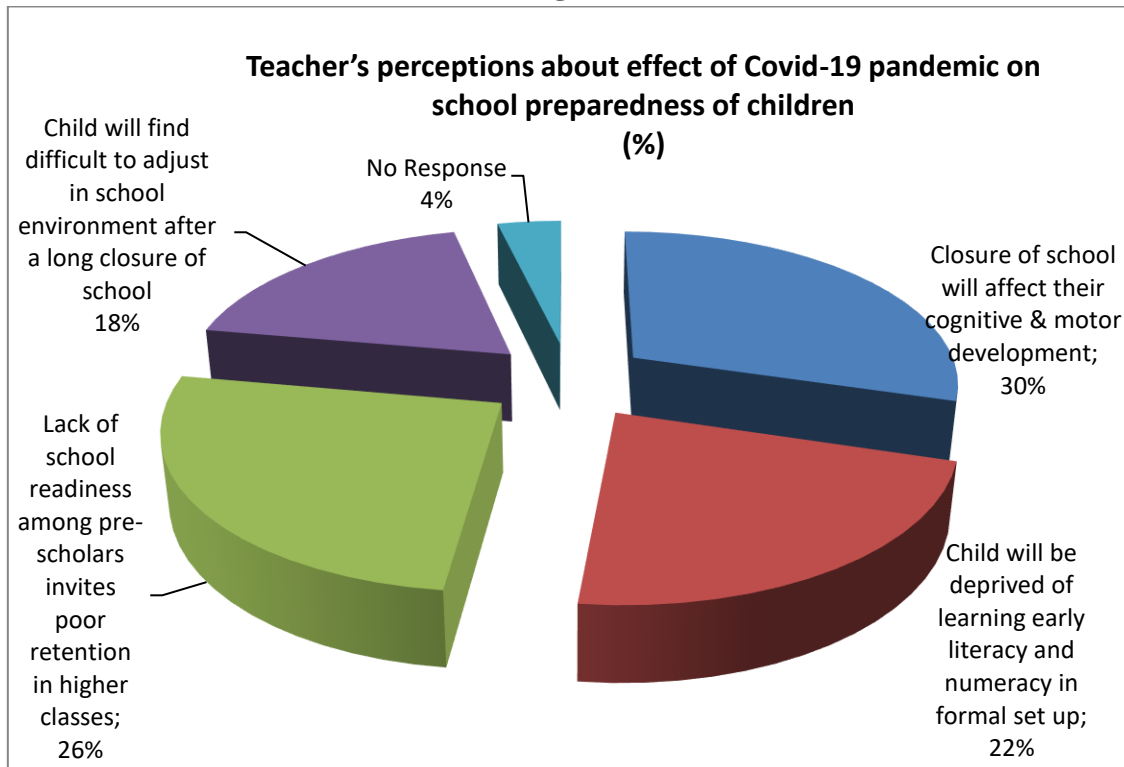


12. Teacher's perceptions about the adverse effect of Covid-19 pandemic on school preparedness of children :

Table:12

Teacher's Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Closure of school will affect their cognitive & motor development;	80	30
Child will be deprived of learning early literacy and numeracy in formal set up;	60	22
Lack of school readiness among pre-scholars invites poor retention in higher classes;	70	26
Child will find difficult to adjust in school environment after a long closure of school	50	18
No Response	10	4

Fig:12



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Learning experiences of pre-school years influence the rest of one’s life. This early period in development provides a foundation that guides children academically, socially and emotionally. Various studies from around the world highlighted the importance of pre-school education and enumerated that investment in high quality of pre-school education has the highest dividend in terms of human resource development. Adequate preparation at this stage helps the children to retain in the primary school. The New Education Policy,2020 of India has categorically mentioned that every child in the age of 3-6 years should have access to free, safe, high quality, developmentally appropriate care and education. However, the unprecedented and petrifying impact of Covid-19 pandemic has affected the learners from pre-school to higher educational institutions.

Present study reveals Covid-19 pandemic had significantly affected the school preparedness of pre-school students. Closure of schools had deprived of the children specifically children of poorer family for getting continual learning supports from the teachers/caregivers in schools. Study further reveals that only 70% of the students were communicated by teachers during pandemic period without adequate learning supports. This shows that a substantial number of children were remained unattended from teachers/caregivers during pandemic period. This had certainly affected on their developmental stage particularly in the domains like physical, language & numeracy, socio-emotional, creativity and aesthetics. Lack of school preparedness among pre-scholar may therefore invite poor retention in higher classes and may have an adjustment difficulties with the fellow students in the schools.

This has obviously widened the gap in pre-school education. Therefore, need of hour is that the pre-primary education has to be looked at from a new perspective under new normal and in the tune of recommendation of New Education Policy,2020. Adequate and child-friendly infrastructure, adequate play materials & equipments, print-rich environment are to be made available in pre-primary classes.

Teachers are to be encouraged to adopt innovative and need based approach while facilitating the learning of children at pre-school stage. Training on child psychology should be a part of training calendar for teachers entrusted/appointed for pre-schoolers. Promoting blended mode of teaching-learning process (online & offline) may be an appropriate approach to support learners in the present context. The findings of this study may give a solid base for policy maker & implementers, who work for addressing the gap, emerged due to Covid-19 pandemic, especially for pre-schoolers. Studies with improved design and expanded coverage alongwith case studies may give better insights and understanding to design a holistic approach for addressing this emergent issue.

RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations have been made on the basis the findings of the study.

1. Revisiting the Curriculum for Pre-primary learners :

Curriculum plays a centre place in teaching-learning process. The present curriculum of Pre-school education needs to be revisited in the context of New Education Policy,2020 and keeping emergent need arised due to covid-19 pandemic.

2. Health monitoring & support from school health programme:

Health report cards are to be maintained properly and regular health check up followed by support from school health team should be ensured for the pre-schoolers.

3. Innovative practices in teaching-learning process :

Teachers should be encouraged to adopt innovative and need based approach while facilitating the learning of children at pre-school stage. Special focus has to be given for designing activities to address the gap emerged for pre-schoolers during covid-19 pandemic. Teachers should adopt some means to make classroom interesting and learning with fun.

4. Print rich classroom:

It is good that schools are having various teaching-learning materials like chart, toys, puzzles, letter card etc., used in classroom. However, classroom should have adequate print-rich materials, which facilitates children for self learning and evaluation.

5. Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT):

Use of digital media/online platform by children is a new concept especially for majority of children in govt schools. Children are, therefore, to be made aware of and skilled to use these media ethically and optimally. It is suggested that blended mode of teaching-learning process may be appropriate to support learners in the present context.

6. Special drive to address learning gap:

It is evident that learning gap has emerged among children due to Covid-19 pandemic. Lack of school preparedness will certainly affect the learning of children at higher stages. It will be pertinent to take a special drive by the concerned authority to cover up the learning gap of pre-schoolers, who are admitted in the primary schools in the next academic year. Remedial measures may be one of the options to address such learning gap of children.

7. Convergent approach to reaching the unreached:

A convergent approach of concerned departments viz, Social welfare, Health, Public Health engineering and the Private partners would be more convenient to reach all the target children at pre-school stage with adequate educational facilities and support in the line of recommendation of New Education Policy,2020.

8. Strengthening parent-teachers meet:

The new normal has redefined the role of stakeholders in numerous ways. There should be strong rapport between teacher and parents to provide educational & health support to the learners at this crucial stage.

9. Linking the findings of the study with Policy :

The findings of the study have a strong message for policy formulation related to effect of Covid-19 pandemic on school preparedness of pre-school children. Studies with improved design and expanded coverage along with case studies should be undertaken for achieving the better results.

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APPENDICES:

1.1 Questionnaire for Head Teacher/Principal (in google sheet)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfV7plq_j6Nju1uu0zNKFoX8i8pfRKx9AzeOPnKiOg_R8VW7A/viewform

1.2 Questionnaire for Teachers (in google sheet)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfV7plq_j6Nju1uu0zNKFoX8i8pfRKx9AzeOPnKiOg_R8VW7A/viewform

1.3 The sample schools are mentioned below:

Sl No.	Name of the school	Education Block
1	Khopanikuchi LP School	Hajo
2	29 No. Murara Balika LP School	Rangia
3	579 No. Chhaygaon LP School	Chaygaon
4	31 No Dahali LP School	Rampur
5	56No. Mandakata Nadirpar LP School	Karara
6	Amingaon Bengali LP School	Karara
7	62 no.Amingaon LP school	Karara
8	Dadara High Secondary School	Hajo
9	Pritipur ME School	Boko
10	Faturi Balika LP School	Chaygaon