A cross sectional study of adjustment of disadvantaged children in an urban school setting

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ABSTRACT

Background: Age six to twelve years is a very critical stage in a child’s life when the child develops a sense of inferiority or confidence depending on the nurturing and the milieu he is brought up. Many children belonging to disadvantaged families do not get proper education and care to enable their complete development. In this study, we aimed to examine the importance of education institutions that cater to disadvantaged children and their role in cultivating identity and confidence in children.

Aims: To study if there is any difference in the adjustment between I standard and III standard students enrolled in a school that provides free holistic education for the children growing up in the slums of an urban city.

Methods: Our study sample consisted of eighteen students each from I and III standards from a school for disadvantaged children from an urban city. Preadolescent adjustment scale (PAAS) was administered and the scores were noted and subjected to statistical analysis.

Results: There was a significantly higher general, school and peer scores on PAAS suggesting better adjustment in the students of III standard than I standard students, but no change was observed in teacher scores of PAAS.

Conclusion: The programs and tutelage given by the school is ameliorating student’s attitude towards education and making them more adjusted and comfortable with going to school. This is critical in bringing the slums of India forward and decreasing the gap between the rich and the poor.

Key words: disadvantaged children; holistic education; adjustment

INTRODUCTION

Erikson, an ego psychologist stressed on the role of society and culture and the conflicts that can take place within the ego itself on the development of an individual at every stage. ¹ At all stages, Erikson claimed that the individual develops on three levels simultaneously: biological social and psychological (representing the organism, membership of society and individualism respectively). The fourth stage of Erikson’s theory of development is industry vs. inferiority (6-12 years). In this, children are at a stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums and to make things on their own. These skills are taught by the teachers who begin to take an important role in the child’s life. Peer groups also have a great influence on the child’s development. The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competences that are valued and begins to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments. If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiatives, they begin to feel industrious and feel confident in their ability to achieve goals. If this initiative is not encouraged, it is restricted by parents or teacher, then the child begins to feel inferior, doubting his own abilities and therefore may not reach his potential. If the child cannot develop the specific skill they feel society is demanding then they may develop inferiority. Some failure may be necessary so that the child can develop modesty which should be properly balanced with competence. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of competence. Hence, age 6-12 years is a very critical stage in a child. It is imperative to nurture feelings of confidence and competence during this time period; this is made
possible largely by education. Unfortunately for many children, especially those that grow up in slums or to disadvantage families, this is difficult to achieve.

What options do people have other than private schools? Not many considering the appalling state of the public education system. Few schools in the public stream have proper access to drinking water, electricity, toilets, playgrounds, furniture or proper buildings. They also compromise on quality; with high rates of teacher absenteeism, unfilled vacancies of teachers, absence of teaching material and shortage of trained, motivated teachers. Education becomes a farce in government schools. Although free public education is available, in most cases, these children study along with peers that are more advantaged who tend to do far better than them in school. This may lead to development of an inferiority complex within disadvantaged children. These children need personalized attention and adults to guide them, to not only to encourage them, but, also believe in them. In this study, we aimed to examine the importance of education institutions that cater to disadvantaged children and their role in cultivating identity and confidence in children. The study was conducted in a charitable private school. With the help of volunteers, children in slum dwellings and hamlets were sought out to enrol in the school, which not only teaches academic subjects, but also a spiritual curriculum, including slokas, mythology, and yoga; thus providing a more holistic education. Furthermore, the school views each child as significant and provides specialized attention to struggling students through the help of volunteers.

**Aims and objectives**

To observe if there is an improvement in the adjustment between I standard and III standard students enrolled in a school that provides free holistic education for the children growing up in the slums of an urban city.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

Our study sample consisted of eighteen students each from I and III standards of a school for disadvantaged children from an urban city. Informed consent was obtained from the parents/caregivers and the school authorities. Baseline sociodemographic data was obtained from each. All the students of I standard were new entrants to the school whereas the III standard students were studying in the same school since I standard. We used the pre-adolescent adjustment scale (PAAS) developed by Pareek, et al. This scale consists of 40 questions each belonging to one of the categories in a random order. Each question was assigned a fixed score ranging from -4 to +4. A tick mark was assigned to the statement applicable to the subject and the scores assigned to that were taken. The scores ranged from negative to positive scores with negative scores indicating poor adjustment and positive indicating good adjustment. The total adjustment scores range from -46 to +34. The four main factors studied include general well-being, adjustment with teachers, adjustment in school and adjustment with peers. Three main factors were considered including the school, advent of teachers, and peers. Means of these scores for first standard and third standard students were compared. Statistical tests for significance (Chi-sq. test, T tests) were done and results compiled. P value of 0.05 and less was taken as significant.

**RESULTS**

In I standard, the mean age of male children was 6.87 years and that of female children was 6.2 years. In the III standard, mean age of male students was 9.11 years and that of female patients was 9.67 years. Genders were matched in both the groups (Table 1 and 2).

**Table 1 Comparison of ages between the students of I standard and III standard**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>I standard (Mean, S.D)</th>
<th>III standard (Mean, S.D)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.87(0.83)</td>
<td>9.11(0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.2(0.42)</td>
<td>9.67(1.89)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Comparison of genders between the students of I and III standard**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>I standard (Mean, S.D)</th>
<th>III standard (Mean, S.D)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10(9.5)</td>
<td>9(9.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8(8.5)</td>
<td>9(8.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi square value=0.11; degrees of freedom=1; P>0.05 (Not significant)

The P value is significant for the general score, peer score and school score of PAAS. It is insignificant for the teacher scores on PAAS (Table 3).

**Table 3 Comparison of PAAS scores between I and III standard students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>PAAS</th>
<th>I Standard Mean (variance)</th>
<th>III Standard Mean (variance)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>General score -0.26(7.98)</td>
<td>2.42(4.59)</td>
<td>3.29†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Peer score 0.47(7.59)</td>
<td>4.21(3.06)</td>
<td>4.98‡</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teacher score -1.21(10.06)</td>
<td>-0.52(7.26)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>School score 1.73(4)</td>
<td>3(3.44)</td>
<td>1.93†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*PAAS-Preadolescent adjustment scale; †-Pd"0.05; ‡-Pd"0.01
**DISCUSSION**

Schooling affects children differently at different ages with primary schools having greater overall effects than secondary probably because the pupil’s self-concept forms between 5-8 years.[4] Global self-worth is very high at school entry, soon to be honed by comparison with peers.[5] The transition to elementary school is a major developmental milestone in the life of a child. Significant number of children experience academic, social, emotional or behavioural difficulties as they adapt to the challenges of formal school.[6] These difficulties are further compounded by poverty. Successful adaptation to school is marked by competencies in academic, social, emotional and behavioural field.[6] Research on this transition and on developmental changes during early schooling is limited in two significant ways. Firstly research efforts have focused primarily on academic outcomes rather than a broader and interrelated patterns of cognitive, social , emotional and behavioural...
functioning; despite the fact that links between these aspects has been underscored. Secondly, research efforts have emphasized primarily on the characteristics of individuals (e.g. temperament, cognitive ability, readiness) and of families (e.g. sociocultural background, family structure, parenting practices) as causal factors in children’s adjustment to school the serious neglect of the schooling context in which such adaptation takes place. 

Researchers have called for broadening the range of schooling outcomes examined; developing a more integrated understanding of young children’s cognitive, social and emotional development and deepening our enquiry of how the conditions of schooling shape children’s development. [6] A UNESCO study of development and reduction of inequalities in a range of differing sociocultural contexts identified seven disadvantaged conditions that impact negatively on children’s early lives namely poverty; inadequate nutrition and healthcare; unsatisfactory physical and home environments; deficiencies in the sociocultural system; detrimental effects of structural change in family; inadequate parenting behaviour and physical or mental problems of the child/family member. [7] It is only by preventing loss of development potential that affects children; it is possible to interrupt the cycle of poverty and help promote equity in society. [8]

The present study revealed a significantly better adjustment scores of third standard students compared to first standard students on general scores (p<0.01), peer scores (p<0.001) and school scores (p=0.031) of PAAS. The students of third standard were studying in the same school from first standard onwards and were in receipt of the warm, accepting tutelage of the school staff for more than two years at the time of our study. This school makes primary education available to disadvantaged families and has dedicated volunteers making sure no child gets left behind.

The better adjustment suggests that the programs and tutelage given by the school is ameliorating students’ attitude towards education and therefore making them more comfortable with going to school. This is critical in bringing the slums of India forward and decreasing the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition to providing education in a welcoming and enriching environment, this school also provided nourishment for the children, including nutritious mid-day meals twice a week and a daily serving of milk. This helps in battling malnutrition which is found to be common among disadvantaged children. Malnutrition is especially prominent in India which “ranked 96 out of 119 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)”. [9]

The number of private primary schools has increased six-fold and the number of government schools fell by over 10 percentage points in the past 40 years. Furthermore, “quality government school education has never been India’s priority” as primary free public education has been low for a while as many feel that educating farmers, artisans and labourers is unnecessary. As a result, India spends only two thirds of the amount necessary in order to educate all of the children. [2] In such a situation such schools provides an ideal solution to the children of the lower class who don’t have the resources to attain quality, holistic education. Students of this school have high aspirations as after speaking to many of them it has been discovered that the majority of the students wish to pursue rewarding careers such as becoming a police officer, doctor, or software engineer instead of their parent’s occupation.

Limitations

Our study was a cross-sectional one conducted in only one such school, and no comparisons were done with other such schools and normal schools. Other confounding factors like family stressors, illness of subject or caretakers, personality traits, coping skills etc. were not studied. Longitudinal study will reveal whether the changes observed are persistent even in the long run.

Future studies need to look into these factors also.

CONCLUSIONS

A contextual understanding of early school adjustment provides direction for intervention and future research. Successful adaptation to school is marked by competencies in academic, social, emotional and behavioural field. [6] Narrowing the educational achievement gap between different social groups in India remains a major challenge, despite sixty years of affirmative-action policy. [10] To address such inequality, India should adopt measures that have proved successful in other countries. These include wider access to quality primary education; standardized assessment of students; and academic support for students who are lagging behind. More research to assess this inequality is also needed to inform education policy. [11]

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References


Conflicts of Interest: None declared  Source of Support: Nil