

The Effect of Professional Development in Enhancing Preschool Teachers' Attitude towards Early Identification of Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Early identification of children with special needs (CwSNs) is a cornerstone of inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The identification of special needs children in early childhood education is crucial for tailoring interventions that can significantly improve developmental outcomes. The attitude of preschool teachers significantly influence the success of identification processes and the provision of timely interventions. This study examines the effect of a structured Professional Development (PD) program through a specially designed learning package on preschool teachers' attitudes towards the early identification of CwSNs, within the policy framework of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The present study used pretest-posttest single group experimental design with a random sample of preschool teachers from Kerala, India. The intervention consisted of a 30-hour PD package focusing on strategies for identifying neurodevelopmental disorders in early childhood. Quantitative data were collected using a validated attitude scale administered before and after the intervention and retention test after three weeks. Statistical analysis (paired-sample t-test) evaluated pre- and post-intervention changes, and thematic analysis explored participant perceptions. The findings indicated a statistically significant improvement in teachers' attitudes towards early identification. The Structured professional development programme in early identification: 'Excel to Elevate' can positively transform teacher attitudes, supporting the realisation of NEP 2020's inclusive education vision. Scalable PD models have the potential to strengthen early intervention systems in ECCE, particularly in resource-limited contexts.

Keywords: Children with Special Needs, Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Identification, Inclusive Education, Learning Package, Preschool Teacher, Professional Development, Teacher Attitude

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is widely recognized as a critical period for fostering holistic development in children, encompassing physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language domains (UNESCO, 2019). In Early Childhood, the child is expected to have perfected his/her sensory organs, and to have attained the 'developmental norms or developmental milestones'. The developmental process in a small group of children may not be normal. A small group of children may not be able to carry out their daily activities or act independently in their environment like their peers. Instead of ignoring them and sending them to special schools, they should be considered as differently abled and treated equally with other children in preschool activities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) affirms every child's right to inclusive and equitable quality education, emphasizing the importance of addressing diverse learning needs from the earliest years. Further, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2) set a global agenda to ensure access to quality ECCE for all children by 2030, highlighting the inclusion of children with special needs (UNICEF, 2021).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlights that children with disabilities have the same rights as other children in areas of health care, nutrition, education, social inclusion and protection from violence, abuse and neglect. Ensuring access to proper support, such as early childhood identification, intervention and education, can fulfil the rights of children with disabilities, promoting rich and fulfilling childhoods and preparing them for full and meaningful participation in adulthood. Along with this, their deficiencies should be identified and evaluated in advance and follow up activities for solving them through training process should be done.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has been globally recognized as a critical period for intervention to ensure holistic child development and long-term well-being (Black et al., 2017). The role of inclusive education within ECCE settings has been emphasized as an essential approach to guarantee equitable learning opportunities for all children, including those with disabilities or developmental delays (UNESCO, 2019).

Global Perspectives on Inclusion and Early Identification

International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) advocate for the rights of children with disabilities to access inclusive education and early intervention services. Early identification of developmental delays and disabilities is recognized worldwide as a foundational strategy that enables timely support and reduces educational and social disparities (Guralnick, 2011; Granlund et al., 2012).

Research from various global contexts indicates that early identification and intervention programs improve cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for children with special needs (Pence & Marfo, 2017). Countries with established early childhood systems incorporate cross-sectoral collaboration between health, education, and social services to maximize developmental support (UNICEF, 2021). The report focusses on children aged 0-6 years with developmental delays and disabilities, stressing the importance of cross-sectoral support for families and children. Early detection of a child's abilities and disabilities at an early stage can provide early intervention and training. The teachers are using the knowledge that they have acquired during pre-service and in-service teacher training for identifying special children with the help of resource teachers or by themselves.

Globally, approximately 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) such as autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and intellectual disabilities being prevalent in early childhood (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Early identification and intervention during ECCE are critical to reducing long-term developmental challenges and promoting positive educational and social outcomes (Black et al., 2017; Granlund et al., 2012). Research underscores that timely recognition of developmental delays facilitates tailored support, improving children's participation in inclusive educational settings (Guralnick, 2011).

National Approach to ECCE and Inclusion

In India, early childhood care and education has gained policy momentum, notably with the enactment of the National Education Policy 2020, which emphasizes inclusive education and early identification of children with special needs (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme is a major national initiative aimed at early childhood care, nutrition, health, and developmental support but faces challenges in adequately addressing the needs of children with disabilities (Planning Commission, 2011). Despite these efforts, the early identification of children with special needs (CwSNs) remains a challenge due to limited awareness among educators, lack of standardized screening protocols, and resource constraints (Sharma et al., 2018; Mehta & Kumar, 2020).

Studies reveal that teachers often lack sufficient training and resources for early identification of children with special needs, which hinders effective inclusion in mainstream preschools (Rao & Singh, 2019; Mehta & Kumar, 2020). Teacher attitudes have been identified as significant factors influencing inclusive practices and early identification efforts (Sharma & Sharma, 2019).

Census data (2011) and epidemiological surveys estimate that approximately 2-6% of Indian children under six experience developmental delays or disabilities, often underreported due to social stigma and inadequate diagnostic facilities (Census of India, 2011; NIMHANS, 2016).

NEP 2020 explicitly emphasizes capacity building for ECCE teachers to identify and support CwSNs, recognizing that early intervention is essential for inclusive education and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, existing teacher training curricula often lack sufficient focus on practical strategies for early identification, contributing to a gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Rao & Singh, 2019).

Regional Insights: Kerala's ECCE and Inclusion Practices

Kerala stands out in India for its robust health and education indicators and progressive social policies, including inclusive education initiatives (Kannan & Nair, 2019). Kerala, known for its advanced social indicators, presents a unique context in India with proactive policies supporting early childhood education and inclusive practices. The state's ECCE landscape includes Anganwadi centers, private preschools, and government-aided institutions that cater to children aged 3-6 years (Kerala State Planning Board, 2020). While Kerala has integrated inclusive education principles within its primary

schooling system (Samagra Shiksha, Kerala), early identification of developmental delays at the preschool level remains inconsistent (Sukumaran et al., 2021).

Despite these efforts, studies indicate gaps in systematic early identification practices and the need for further professional development among preschool teachers to support children with special needs effectively (George & Joseph, 2020; Sukumaran et al., 2021). Research highlights the positive impact of targeted training packages in improving teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills in early identification and inclusive education (Thomas & Varghese, 2019).

Barriers such as insufficient teacher training, low confidence in handling special needs, and societal attitudes towards disability impact timely detection (George & Joseph, 2020). Studies have shown that preschool teachers in Kerala often rely on parental reports rather than systematic observation or screening tools, resulting in delayed referrals and interventions (Thomas & Varghese, 2019).

Gaps in Existing Literature

While extensive research, supports early identification and inclusive education, there remains a need for context-specific professional development programs tailored to preschool teachers' needs, particularly in regions like Kerala. Limited studies evaluate the sustained impact of such interventions on teacher attitudes and practices, signaling a research gap this study aims to address.

Need for Professional Development

Teacher attitudes towards children with special needs critically influence their engagement in early identification and inclusion (Forlin & Sin, 2017). Positive attitudes are linked with greater vigilance in recognizing developmental concerns and collaboration with families and specialists (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Professional development programs tailored to build knowledge, skills, and empathy can significantly improve teacher readiness for inclusive practices and early intervention (Pence & Marfo, 2017; Sharma & Sharma, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present study evaluates the effectiveness of a structured professional development package aimed at enhancing preschool teachers' attitudes toward early identification of children with special needs, focusing on neurodevelopmental disorders. Such evidence-based interventions align with global and national calls for strengthening ECCE systems to ensure that all children receive equitable opportunities for learning and development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a pre-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured learning package aimed at enhancing preschool teachers' attitudes towards the early identification of children with special needs (CwSNs). This design allowed for measurement of attitude changes before and after the intervention within the same participant group (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The absence of a control group limits causal inference but provides valuable initial insights into the intervention's impact.

The One – Group, Pretest – Posttest Design

O1 X O2

X - Exposure of a group to an experimental (treatment) variable.

O - Observation or test administered.

Participants

The study sample comprised 39 preschool teachers randomly drawn from various early childhood education institutions under the department of general education, Kerala. Participants were selected based on their expression of interest through a Google form circulated among teachers of early childhood education institutions under the department of general education, Kerala. The consent for voluntary participation in preschool teaching and willingness to engage in professional development focused on inclusion was also signed by the participants. The sample was stratified into subgroups by age (30–40 years, 41–50 years, and above 50 years) and teaching experience (1–10 years, 11–20 years, and 21–30 years) to explore the differential effects of the PD learning package.

Intervention: Learning Package

A structured PD learning package focused on Early Identification of CwSNs was developed and implemented among the selected sample of preschool teachers. The intervention consisted of a 30-hour structured professional development program titled “Excel to Elevate”, developed using the ASSURE instructional design model (Smaldino, Lowther & Russell,

2008). The package focused on early identification strategies for neurodevelopmental disorders, foundational knowledge of child development, and inclusive education practices. Content was delivered via a blended approach combining synchronous online sessions (using Google Meet), asynchronous self-learning modules, videos, and interactive assignments hosted on Google Classroom. Communication and peer collaboration were facilitated through WhatsApp groups segmented by state and district.

Instruments

Teachers' attitudes toward early identification of CwSNs were assessed using a validated Attitude Test, administered at three intervals: pre-intervention (pretest), immediately post-intervention (posttest), and three weeks after the intervention (delayed posttest). The instrument was designed to capture cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of attitudes related to early identification and inclusion.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began with administration of the pretest to establish baseline attitudes. The 30-hour learning package was then implemented over a scheduled period, ensuring full participation through monitoring attendance and engagement in online and offline activities. Immediately following the completion of the program, the posttest was administered to measure immediate attitude changes. A delayed posttest conducted three weeks later assessed retention of attitude improvements.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean, median, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) were calculated to summarize attitude scores across test intervals. Paired sample t-tests evaluated the significance of differences between pretest and posttest scores, as well as between posttest and delayed posttest scores, indicating immediate and sustained effects respectively. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested for differences in attitude changes across age and teaching experience subgroups. Significance was assessed at $p < 0.05$.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

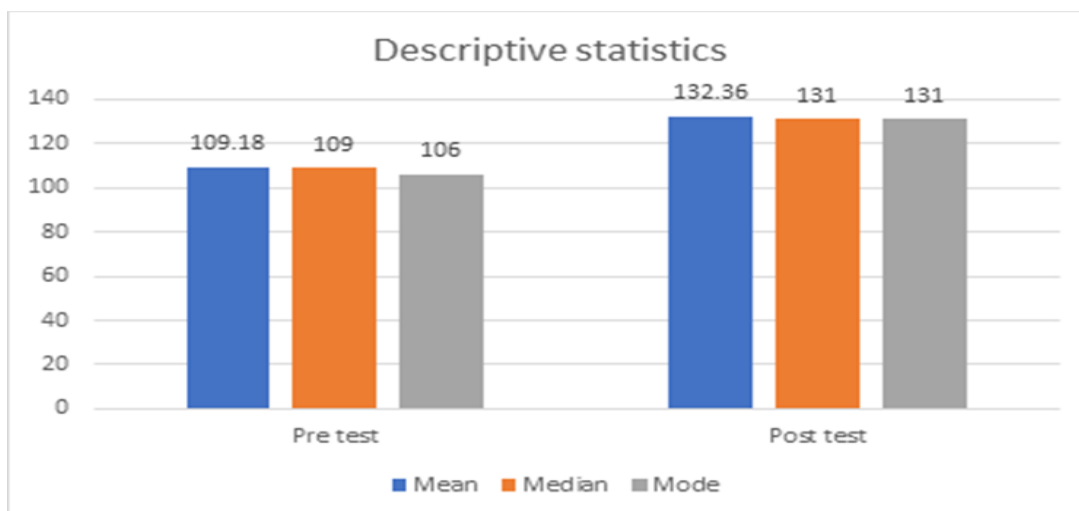
Descriptive analysis was conducted on the attitude scores of preschool teachers toward early identification of children with special needs (CwSNs) at pretest and posttest stages.

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics for Pre and Post Attitude test scores of preschool teachers' Attitude towards Early Identification of CwSNs

Statistics calculated	Value obtained	
	Pretest	Posttest
Mean	109.18	132.36
Median	109.00	131.00
Mode	106	131
SD	12.841	11.287
Skewness	-0.163	0.204
Kurtosis	1.932	-0.666

The mean pretest attitude score was 109.18 (SD = 12.84), while the posttest mean score increased to 132.36 (SD = 11.29). The median and mode also reflected this upward shift, with pretest median at 109 and posttest at 131. The skewness and kurtosis values indicate that the data distribution was reasonably normal at both intervals.

Graphical representation of the Descriptive Statistics for pre and post attitude test scores of preschool teachers' Attitude towards Early Identification of CwSNs



The notable increase in mean scores from pretest to posttest suggests a positive change in teachers' attitudes following the intervention. The variability of scores decreased slightly post-intervention, indicating a more consistent positive attitude across participants.

Effectiveness of the Learning Package (Whole Sample)

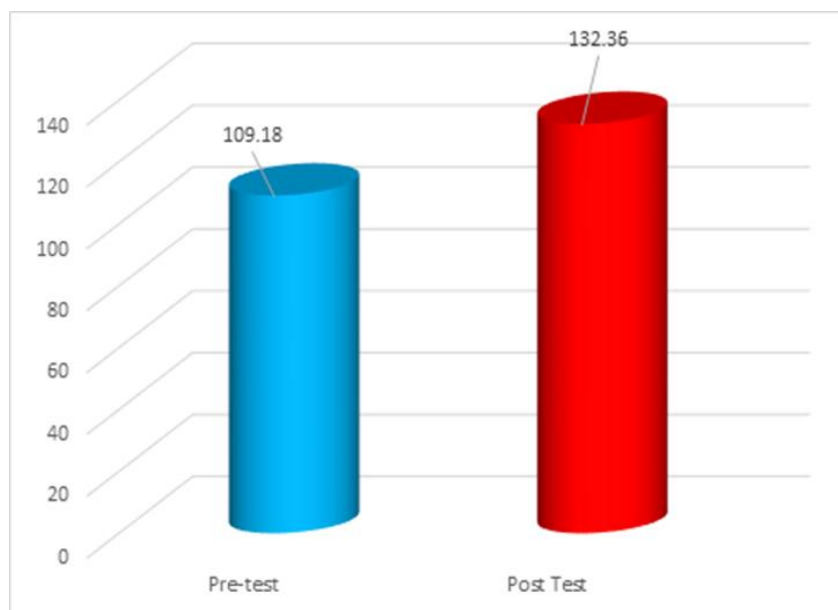
A paired-sample t-test was conducted to assess the significance of the change in attitude scores.

Table 2: Pretest and posttest mean scores of the Attitude Test.

Tests	Mean	No. of samples	Standard deviation	Critical ratio	Level of significance
Pre Test	109.18	39	12.841	-11.439	P<0.05
Post Test	132.36	39	11.287		

The results revealed a statistically significant increase in attitude scores from pretest ($M = 109.18$) to posttest ($M = 132.36$), $t(38) = 11.44$, $p < 0.05$. This finding confirms that the learning package 'Excel to Elevate' effectively enhanced preschool teachers' attitudes towards early identification of CwSNs.

Graphical representation of pretest and posttest mean scores of the Attitude Test in the experimental group to find out the significant difference on total score.



This outcome aligns with prior research demonstrating that targeted professional development can foster more positive attitudes and increase teacher preparedness for inclusion and early identification (Buell et al., 1999; McHatton et al., 2011).

Effectiveness Based on Age

One-way ANOVA was employed to evaluate whether the attitude changes varied across age groups (30–40, 41–50, above 50 years).

Table 3: ANOVA results for posttest scores based on age groups.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Post test	Between Groups	270.243	2	135.121	1.064	0.356
	Within Groups	4570.732	36	126.965		
	Total	4840.974	38			

The analysis yielded no significant differences between groups ($F(2, 36) = 1.06, p = 0.356$), indicating that the intervention was equally effective regardless of teachers' age.

This suggests that the learning package is broadly applicable across diverse age demographics, an important consideration given the mixed age range of preschool educators.

Effectiveness Based on Teaching Experience

Similarly, differences based on teaching experience (1–10, 11–20, 21–30 years) were examined using one-way ANOVA.

Table 4 - Data and results of test of significant difference in the post attitude test scores with respect to teaching experience

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Post test	Between Groups	374.723	2	187.362	1.510	0.235
	Within Groups	4466.251	36	124.063		
	Total	4840.974	38			

No significant differences were observed among groups ($F(2, 36) = 1.51, p = 0.235$), demonstrating that the learning package positively influenced attitudes irrespective of participants' length of teaching experience.

This finding underscores the package's adaptability and potential for professional development across various career stages.

Retention of Attitude Change

To evaluate the sustainability of the attitude improvements, a delayed posttest was administered three weeks following the intervention.

Table 5 - Data and results of posttest and retention mean scores of the Attitude test towards identifying special needs in experimental group on total scores

	Mean	No. of samples	Std. Deviation	t	p value
Post-test	132.36	39	11.287	0.036	0.971
Retention	132.3846	39	11.51570		

The mean score at delayed posttest ($M = 132.38, SD = 11.52$) was not significantly different from the immediate posttest score ($M = 132.36, SD = 11.29$), $t(38) = 0.036, p = 0.971$.

This indicates that the positive attitudinal change was retained over time, reflecting the learning package's effectiveness in creating lasting impact on preschool teachers' perspectives.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that the prepared PD learning package effectively improved preschool teachers' attitudes towards early identification of CwSNs. The significant increase in posttest scores highlights the potential of targeted professional development in fostering positive attitudinal shifts. The consistent effectiveness across different age and experience groups further supports the learning package's broad applicability. The absence of significant differences across age and experience suggests that such interventions can be universally implemented in diverse early childhood education contexts.

Moreover, the retention of attitude changes over three weeks indicates the durability of the intervention's impact. Retention of positive attitude changes over three weeks further emphasizes the value of well-designed, contextually relevant training programs. These findings are consistent with the broader literature advocating for sustained, inclusive teacher education to foster early detection and intervention (Guralnick, 2011; Odom et al., 2011).

The findings highlight the transformative role of professional development in shaping teachers' attitudes toward early identification of CwSNs. The lack of significant differences across age and experience groups suggests the universal applicability of the learning package. Furthermore, the retention of positive attitudes underscores the learning package's ability to create lasting change. The learning package 'Excel to Elevate' demonstrates a scalable model that integrates technology and self-paced learning with interactive components, catering to diverse learner needs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that a structured, technology-supported learning package significantly improved preschool teachers' attitudes towards the early identification of children with special needs. The intervention was effective across diverse age groups and teaching experience levels, indicating its broad applicability in early childhood education settings. Moreover, the positive attitudinal changes were retained over time, highlighting the durability of the learning package's impact.

The findings underscore the critical role of professional development in equipping preschool teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to recognize developmental challenges early. Such attitudinal shifts are foundational to fostering inclusive practices that ensure children with special needs receive timely support and intervention.

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence advocating for contextually relevant, accessible, and sustained training programs for early childhood educators. Integrating these learning packages within routine teacher education and in-service training can support systemic efforts towards inclusive education and the realization of children's rights to equitable learning opportunities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Policy Level Interventions:**

Educational policymakers should mandate inclusion of early identification and intervention modules within preschool teacher education curricula and should incorporate structured training modules that focus on early identification of CwSNs into continuous professional development programs for preschool teachers.

- **Curriculum Development / Design:**

Teacher education institutions should design and implement specialized, evidence-based training packages focusing on developmental milestones, identification strategies, and inclusive classroom practices.

- **Scaling and Sustainability**

Educational authorities and stakeholders should support scaling the 'Excel to Elevate' package or similar models across regions, ensuring accessibility through blended learning formats.

- **Awareness and Advocacy:**

Ongoing awareness campaigns targeted at educators, parents, and communities are essential to foster a collaborative approach to early identification and inclusion of children with special needs.

Implications for Practice

The positive shift in attitudes demonstrated by preschool teachers following this intervention highlights the importance of investing in targeted, practical, and flexible professional development. Educational leaders should prioritize such initiatives as a vital step toward inclusive early childhood education systems that recognize and support diverse learner needs effectively.

The results emphasize the importance of comprehensive professional development for preschool educators. By equipping teachers with practical knowledge and skills, such interventions promote proactive identification and support for children with special needs. Policymakers and educational leaders should prioritize the implementation of context-specific, sustainable PD programs to foster inclusive educational practices.

These findings suggest that targeted professional development programs can effectively address attitudinal barriers among teachers, leading to more inclusive and supportive classroom environments for CWSNs. Future research could explore the impact of similar interventions across diverse educational settings and cultures to validate and extend these findings.

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Ethical Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study did not involve any interventions that posed risk or harm to the participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Shila Jasmine L S conceptualized and designed the study, developed the learning package, conducted data collection, performed data analysis, and prepared the original manuscript draft.

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