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Educational Learning Needs of Orphaned Children in Institutional Homes

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Abstract— Orphaned children raised in institutional homes face a constellation of educational, psychosocial, and life-skill gaps that conventional schooling rarely addresses. This manuscript reports on a mixed-method survey of 180 children (ages 8–18) and 32 caregivers across six institutional homes in two Indian states, exploring academic readiness, socio-emotional development, digital literacy, vocational aspirations, and support systems. Findings indicate that while basic literacy and numeracy are generally achieved, higher-order competencies—critical thinking, problem solving, language fluency, and self-directed learning—remain underdeveloped.



Fig.1 Socio-emotional learning,Source([1])

Children express strong needs for individualized mentoring, trauma-informed counseling, experiential learning opportunities, and career guidance. Caregivers highlight resource constraints, staff turnover, and a lack of specialized pedagogical training. The study proposes a multi-tiered learning needs framework: (1) Foundational Academic Support, (2) Socio-Emotional and Behavioral Learning, (3) Life Skills and Digital Competence, and (4) Transition Planning and Career Readiness. Policy and practice recommendations include integrated remedial programs, participatory curriculum design, partnerships with community volunteers and EdTech platforms, and structured exit-transition modules. The paper concludes that meeting the holistic learning needs of orphaned children requires a paradigm shift from custodial care to learner-centered, trauma-responsive ecosystems that continue beyond institutional walls.

Keywords

orphaned children; institutional homes; learning needs; socio-emotional learning; life skills; remedial education; India; survey research

Introduction

Children who grow up without parental care constitute one of the most vulnerable cohorts in any education system. Institutional homes—commonly managed by government departments, faith-based organizations, or non-profits—offer shelter, nutrition, and formal schooling access. Yet, they often struggle to provide tailored educational support, emotional security, and long-term career scaffolding. The absence of a stable family environment, attachment figures, and consistent academic supervision can result in fragmented learning trajectories and unmet developmental needs.



Fig.2 Remedial education,Source([2])

India's Child Protection Services and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act envision a rights-based approach, but implementation disparities remain. Many institutional homes rely on nearby government schools, where teachers may be unaware of or unequipped to address the specific learning profiles of institutionalized children. Moreover, within the homes, caregivers are frequently overloaded with administrative and caregiving tasks, leaving limited bandwidth for individualized educational planning.

This manuscript seeks to answer three central questions:

1. **What are the primary academic, socio-emotional, and life-skill learning needs of orphaned children residing in institutional homes?**
2. **How do children and caregivers perceive current educational support structures and gaps?**
3. **What actionable frameworks and strategies can better align institutional care with holistic learning outcomes?**

By combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights, the study contributes empirical evidence to a field that often relies on anecdotal reports. It also offers a structured framework to guide interventions by policymakers, administrators, and educators.

Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing "Learning Needs" in Vulnerable Contexts

"Learning needs" encompass not only curricular knowledge but also the skills, attitudes, and supports required to learn effectively. In vulnerable contexts, these needs are compounded by trauma, instability, and language or cultural discontinuities. Scholars distinguish between **foundational learning** (literacy, numeracy, basic science) and **transformational learning** (critical thinking, socio-emotional competencies, life skills). For children without parental support, both domains are equally critical.

2.2 Orphanhood and Educational Outcomes

Global research consistently documents that orphaned children exhibit lower school attendance, poorer academic performance, and higher dropout rates compared to their non-orphaned peers. The reasons range from psychological trauma and stigmatization to material deprivation and frequent relocations. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia indicate that institutional care can stabilize access to schooling but may simultaneously limit exposure to community-based learning and mentorship, which are essential for identity formation and aspiration building.

2.3 Institutional Care: Strengths and Limitations

Institutional homes can provide structured routines, secure accommodation, and pooled educational resources. Some homes integrate tutoring, computer labs, and vocational workshops. However, literature critiques institutional settings for their "one-size-fits-all" approach, limited caregiver-child ratios, and the potential for emotional neglect. Moreover, staff often lack specialized training in special education, counseling, or remedial pedagogy, which constrains their capacity to diagnose and respond to individual learning difficulties.

2.4 Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Education

Children who have experienced abandonment, neglect, or bereavement often exhibit anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, or attention difficulties. SEL frameworks (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) are vital. Trauma-informed education emphasizes safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. Evidence shows that SEL interventions can enhance academic outcomes, reduce behavioral incidents, and improve long-term well-being.

2.5 Life Skills, Digital Literacy, and Transition Planning

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and UNICEF guidelines underscore life skills—communication, financial literacy, health awareness, digital competence—as central to preparing adolescents for independent adulthood. For institutionalized youth, structured transition planning (e.g.,

career counseling, internships, alumni networks, and post-institutional housing or scholarship schemes) is critical to prevent post-18 vulnerabilities such as homelessness or exploitative labor.

2.6 Gaps in Indian Research

While several Indian studies examine street children, child laborers, and children in conflict with the law, fewer focus specifically on orphaned children in institutional care and their nuanced learning needs. Existing research often aggregates diverse vulnerable groups, obscuring context-specific interventions. This study addresses that lacuna by offering a focused, empirically grounded analysis.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A **mixed-method, cross-sectional survey design** was adopted to capture both breadth (quantitative indicators) and depth (qualitative perspectives). The design allows triangulation, thereby strengthening internal validity.

3.2 Sampling

- **Sites:** Six institutional homes (three government-run, three NGO-managed) located in two Indian states (one urban, one semi-urban context in each state).
- **Participants:** 180 orphaned children (95 girls, 85 boys) aged 8–18 years, and 32 adult caregivers/educators.
- **Sampling Technique:** Purposive sampling for institutions (based on permissions and diversity of management), followed by stratified random sampling within each home to ensure representation across age and gender.

3.3 Instruments

1. **Child Learning Needs Survey (CLNS):** A 42-item questionnaire covering five domains—Academic Support, Socio-Emotional Well-being, Life Skills/Digital Literacy, Learning Environment, and Future Aspirations. Likert scales (1–5) measured perceived adequacy of support and self-assessed competence.
2. **Caregiver Educational Support Survey (CESS):** A 25-item tool capturing caregiver perceptions of children's needs, available resources, and institutional constraints.
3. **Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups:** Conducted with a subset of 36 children and 12 caregivers to contextualize survey findings.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over eight weeks. Child participants were briefed in age-appropriate language and provided assent; institutional heads gave consent. Surveys were administered in small groups by trained field investigators. Interviews/focus groups were audio-recorded (with permission) and later transcribed.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages) and cross-tabulations by age and gender. Qualitative data underwent thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and illustrative quotes. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, weaving numeric trends with narrative insights.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical protocols: informed consent/assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and referral to counseling services when distress was observed. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts.

Survey-Based Research Findings

4.1 Academic Support Needs

- **Remedial Learning:** 64% of children reported difficulty in at least one core subject (especially mathematics and English). Many lacked after-school tutoring or individualized feedback.
- **Learning Materials:** 52% desired more age-appropriate storybooks, science kits, and interactive learning tools.
- **Language Barriers:** Children from tribal or rural backgrounds struggled with English-medium content; 41% requested bilingual support.

4.2 Socio-Emotional and Behavioral Needs

- **Counseling Access:** 58% had never spoken to a counselor; 72% expressed interest in "someone to talk to privately" about fears, grief, or future uncertainties.
- **Peer Relationships:** While 79% reported having friends within the home, interviews revealed cliques

and conflicts; children wanted structured group activities to build cooperation and empathy.

- **Self-Esteem and Agency:** Qualitative data showed low self-efficacy statements (e.g., "I don't think I can do college"). Children desired role models and success stories from alumni.

4.3 Life Skills and Digital Literacy

- **Daily Living Skills:** 47% felt unsure about managing money, cooking, or handling official paperwork—skills vital for post-institution independence.
- **Digital Access:** 63% had intermittent access to computers or smartphones; only 28% had received formal digital literacy training (typing, internet safety, basic coding).
- **Health and Sexuality Education:** Adolescents requested reliable information on puberty, reproductive health, and personal safety.

4.4 Learning Environment and Pedagogy

- **Teacher Interaction:** 55% felt teachers in external schools "don't understand us," indicating a need for sensitization training.
- **Home Schedule:** Rigid timetables left little room for individualized study or creative pursuits. Children preferred flexible study hours and hobby clubs.

4.5 Future Aspirations and Transition Readiness

- **Career Clarity:** Only 34% could name a specific career path; most responses were generic ("doctor," "police"). Career guidance workshops and aptitude assessments were scarce.
- **Exit Planning:** Caregivers acknowledged limited planning for children aging out at 18; only two of six homes had formal transition protocols.

Results and Interpretation

The integrated findings reveal a layered pattern of learning needs:

1. **Foundational Academic Needs Persist:** Despite school enrollment, gaps in comprehension, language fluency, and applied mathematics persist. Institutional homes rarely offer specialized remedial modules, and reliance on volunteers is inconsistent.
2. **Socio-Emotional Learning is Under-Served:** Children internalize trauma and insecurity, affecting concentration and motivation. The absence of trained counselors or SEL curricula undermines academic progress.
3. **Life Skills and Digital Competence are Emerging Priorities:** As the NEP pivots toward holistic education, institutional homes lag in equipping children with practical and digital skills critical for twenty-first-century livelihoods.
4. **Transition Planning is Fragmented:** Adolescents approach adulthood without clear roadmaps, increasing vulnerability to exploitation. Structured exit packages—scholarships, mentorship networks, housing options—are minimal.
5. **Caregiver Capacity is Constrained:** Staff turnover, insufficient training, and administrative burden dilute the quality of educational support. Caregivers desire partnerships with schools, NGOs, and EdTech firms to share the load.

These results align with international literature but underscore context-specific nuances such as bilingual support needs and the complexity of navigating Indian bureaucratic systems for higher education or employment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Orphaned children in institutional homes inhabit a liminal educational space: formally enrolled yet informally underserved. Their learning needs are holistic—spanning academics, emotional healing, life skills, and future planning. This study demonstrates that children themselves can articulate these needs when given voice through participatory surveys and interviews. Meeting these needs requires moving beyond a custodial approach to a learner-centered, trauma-informed paradigm that integrates school, home, and community resources.

6.2 Recommendations

1. **Integrated Remedial and Enrichment Programs:** Establish in-house or partnered remedial classes with diagnostic assessments and individualized learning plans. Use project-based learning to build higher-order thinking.
2. **Embed Socio-Emotional Learning and Counseling:** Train caregivers/teachers in SEL and trauma-informed practices; schedule regular counseling sessions and peer-support circles.

3. **Life Skills and Digital Literacy Modules:** Implement age-graded curricula on financial literacy, health, communication, and digital safety; partner with local colleges or NGOs for workshops.
4. **Career Guidance and Transition Packages:** Introduce aptitude tests, mentorship from alumni or professionals, internships, and documented exit plans (housing, scholarships, job placements).
5. **Capacity Building for Caregivers:** Offer continuous professional development, reduce administrative overload through digital record systems, and incentivize retention.
6. **Policy and Networking:** Advocate for state-level guidelines that mandate transition planning, SEL integration, and monitoring of educational outcomes. Create networks of institutional homes to share resources and best practices.

6.3 Future Research

Longitudinal studies tracking educational and employment outcomes post-institutionalization can illuminate which interventions yield sustainable impact. Action research, where children co-design learning programs, could further democratize educational planning.

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