Original Article

Refractive error among school children in Jhapa, Nepal

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Abstract

Purpose: To evaluate the pattern of refractive errors among school children in Jhapa, Nepal.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was designed to evaluate refractive status of 2236 school children in three government schools and a private school. A complete eye examination was carried out in all children including slit lamp examination, fundus examination, retinoscopy and subjective refraction. Chi-square test was performed to analyze incidence of refractive error in gender; age groups; type of schools.

Results: Out of 2236 students, refractive error was present in 192 (8.58%). Unaided, presenting, and corrected visual acuity less than 6/12 (0.5) were present in 3.8% 2.6% and 0.2% respectively. After refractive correction, visual acuity was significantly improved ($\chi^2 = 81.3$, df = 3, $p < 0.01$) to 6/6 in 98% students. Forty-five students (2.01%) were amblyopic. Refractive error was significantly prevalent ($\chi^2 = 3.707$, df = 1, $p = 0.05$, ODD = 1.3) in male (9.76%) than in female students (7.48%). Refractive error was significantly high in private school than government schools ($\chi^2 = 6.7$, df = 1, $p < 0.01$) Myopia was the most common type (44.79%) of refractive error. The myopia of 2-6 diopters was most common in 48.8% Myopia was found to increase as age advanced. Hyperopia and astigmatism initially increased but later decreased with age.

Conclusions: Refractive error was a significant problem in schoolchildren in Jhapa. Myopia was the most common refractive problem. Private schoolchildren had significantly higher refractive errors.

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Introduction
An estimated 153 million people over 5 years of age are visually impaired as a result of uncorrected refractive errors, of which 8 million are blind. Approximately 12.8 million children in the age group 5-15 years are visually impaired from uncorrected or inadequately corrected refractive errors, estimating a global prevalence of 0.96%.\(^1\)

Poor vision and an inability to read material on the chalkboard due to refractive error can profoundly affect a child’s participation and learning in the classroom.\(^2\) It also has serious social implications for the child in school. According to the National Blindness Survey of Nepal of 1981, refractive error was identified as a primary ocular disorder in 1.3% of the 39,887 examined persons of all ages (Brilliant, 1988).\(^3\) In the study done by the Refractive Error Study in Children (RESC) group, refractive error was the major cause of visual acuity of 0.5 (20/40) or worse at least one eye in 89.5% of children in China and 56% in Nepal. The study further reported that reduced vision, because of myopia, was an important public health problem in school-age children; and more than 9% of children could benefit from prescription glasses.\(^4,5\)

The purpose of this study was to gather information on the refractive status of students so that an effective approach can be planned to tackle the burden of readily correctable refraction problems in school children. Children were also provided with glasses and medicines when found necessary. When encountered with diseases that could not be managed at schools, they are brought to Mechi Eye Hospital for appropriate management.

Methods and methodology

Sample size and study design
A cross-sectional school-based study was conducted in 1150 students in three government schools of Jhapa: 429 students in Durga SS; 413 students in Amrijoti SS, and 308 in Gyan Niketan SS; and 1086 students in a private school of Jhapa: Little Flower English HHS from June, 2009 to October 2009. Distribution of students is given in Table 1. All the children attending the schools visited were included in the study. Very few children, who were absent at the time of the school visit, were left out. There were around 18 private schools (available at http://enepal.asia/schoolout.htm#Jhapa. Accessed on December 26, 2010) and 376 government schools in Jhapa.\(^6\) As the population was drawn from the schools which were easily accessible to the hospital, it was anticipated that prevalence of refractive error different than that found in earlier studies in Jhapa.

Table 1. All the children attending the schools visited were included in the study. Very few children, who were absent at the time of the school visit, were left out. There were around 18 private schools (available at http://enepal.asia/schoolout.htm#Jhapa. Accessed on December 26, 2010) and 376 government schools in Jhapa.\(^6\) As the population was drawn from the schools which were easily accessible to the hospital, it was anticipated that prevalence of refractive error different than that found in earlier studies in Jhapa.

Jhapa is the easternmost and one of the developed districts of Nepal, lies in fertile Terai plane of Mechi Zone, covers an area of 1,606 km\(^2\) with Chandragadhi as its district headquarters, and has a total population of 217,608 children below 14 years of age. Male female ratio is 1.03. Jhapa borders Ilam district in the north, Morang district in the west, the Indian state of Bihar in the south and east, and the Indian state of West Bengal in the east. The district is divided into 47 Village Development Committees (VDCs) and three municipalities. Jhapa is the home to about
Table 1: Distribution of students in private (PS) and government schools (GS) by age and sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution by age and sex</th>
<th>PS, n (%)</th>
<th>GS1, n (%)</th>
<th>GS2, n (%)</th>
<th>GS3, n (%)</th>
<th>Total, n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-7 years</td>
<td>174 (16)</td>
<td>88 (20.5)</td>
<td>122 (29.5)</td>
<td>77 (25)</td>
<td>461 (20.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-10 years</td>
<td>280 (25.8)</td>
<td>165 (38.5)</td>
<td>121 (29.3)</td>
<td>84 (27.3)</td>
<td>650 (29.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-13 years</td>
<td>356 (32.8)</td>
<td>104 (24.2)</td>
<td>103 (24.9)</td>
<td>78 (25.3)</td>
<td>641 (28.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-16 years</td>
<td>276 (25.4)</td>
<td>72 (16.8)</td>
<td>67 (16.2)</td>
<td>69 (22.4)</td>
<td>484 (21.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>490 (45.1)</td>
<td>231 (53.8)</td>
<td>202 (48.9)</td>
<td>163 (52.9)</td>
<td>1,086 (48.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>506 (45.9)</td>
<td>198 (46.2)</td>
<td>211 (51.1)</td>
<td>145 (47.1)</td>
<td>1,150 (51.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,086 (100)</td>
<td>429 (100)</td>
<td>413 (100)</td>
<td>308 (100)</td>
<td>2,236 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

99 ethnic people. Majority includes Bahun (25.07%) and chhettri (14.9%) with minorities of Rajbanshi, Satar, Meche, Koke, Limbu, Dhimal, Gangain, Rai, Dhangad, Tamang, Uraon, Magar, Gurung, and Newar. Almost all the villages and towns are linked by roads. Jhapa has a literacy rate of 66.93% which is highest in Nepal after the capital city Kathmandu.

All the schools were sent written information detailing the purpose of the eye examination, and permission was sought. All the parents were advised to be present on the day of examination. Those parents, who couldn’t visit on the day of examination, were sent a letter stating their children’s ocular health status. They were advised to visit in the hospital for further clarification. The team carrying out the school screening consisted of an ophthalmologist, two optometrists, an ophthalmic assistant and a driver.

Tools and examination

The materials taken with the team were internally illuminated Snellen vision chart (model AME 20, appasamy), torch lights, hand held slit lamp (Heine Germany), direct ophthalmoscopes (Heine Beta 200, Germany), retinoscopes (Heine Beta 200, Germany), trial set, universal trial frames (Emami), RAF rule.

The students underwent the following examinations:

— Uncorrected, presenting and best corrected visual acuity was assessed in internally illuminated Snellen vision chart at 6-meter distance to maintain the standard of visual acuity assessment.

— Extraocular movements and cover tests were performed using torch light, and convergence was tested using RAF rule.

— Anterior segment examination was carried out with the help of a torch light and portable slit lamp biomicroscopy (Heine, Germany).

— Retinoscopy and subjective refraction was performed in all the children. A cyclopentolate refraction was performed with cyclopentolate HCL 1% in all the cases of hypermetropia, strabismus, and amblyopia, unstable end point of refraction, scissor reflex, anisometropia more than 1.00 D, high refractive error, and the cases where vision couldn’t be improved with normal refraction, and suspected case of pseudomyopia. When family history of strabismus, amblyopia or high refractive error was present, cyclopentolate refraction was also considered in those children. A cyclopentolate drop was instilled two times at an interval of 10 minutes, and refraction was carried out after 45 minutes from the first instillation. This process was followed by subjective refraction after 3 days.

— Fundus evaluation was done with a direct ophthalmoscope. Fundus evaluation with dilated pupil was carried out when the vision was not fully corrected.

Diagnostic criteria

The diagnostic criteria used for refractive error was 0.5 diopters or more for myopia, 1.00 diopter or more for hypermetropia and ≥ 0.75 DC for astigmatism. Presenting vision is defined by the visual acuity in the better eye unaided or using currently available refractive correction in spectacle wearers. Best-corrected vision was the visual acuity in the better eye achieved by subjects tested with refraction. A diagnosis of amblyopia was made if the vision was 6/9 or worse after a careful eye examination including funduscopy through dilated pupil and cycloplegic refraction.

Statistical analysis

All data were entered in the statistical package for social studies version 14.0 for evaluation. Chi-square test was performed to analyze differences in the refractive error between male and female, among different age group, and between government schools and the private school. P-value for confidence interval of 95% was considered significant at the p < 0.05 level for prevalence estimates.

Result

Visual acuity in school children

A total of 2236 children between 5 and 16 years of age were examined in the four schools that were included in the study. Unaided visual acuity was normal (6/6) in 2044 (91.4%) students. Presenting VA was normal (6/6) in 2068 (92.5%) students. 110 students (5%) had presenting VA 6/9-6/18, 58 (3%) students had visual acuity 6/18-6/60 (Table 2). Out of 35 students (1.6%) who wore glasses, 24 students (1.1%) had presenting visual acuity 6/6. Unaided visual acuity worse than 6/12 (0.5) was present in 85 students (3.8%). After refractive correction, visual acuity
was significantly improved ($\chi^2 = 61.2$, df = 3, $p < 0.01$) to 6/6 in 98% students. Forty-five (2%) students were amblyopic. After refractive correction vision worse than 6/12 (0.5) was present in 0.2%.

**Prevalence of refractive error in school children**

Prevalence of refractive error is shown in Table 3. A total of 192 students (8.6%) had refractive error. Refractive error was prevalent in 9.8% (106/1086) male and 7.5% (86/1150) female. Males had significantly higher refractive error ($\chi^2 = 3.707$, df = 1, $p = 0.05$, ODD = 1.3) than females. Prevalence of refractive error which was 6.5% (ODD = 0.7) in age 5-7 years increased to 10.1% (ODD = 1.3) in age 14-16 years in children suggesting that refractive error was prevalent more in elder children. But, statistically the increment was insignificant ($\chi^2 = 3.6$, df = 3, $p = 0.22$).

Prevalence of refractive error in private school was 10.3% (112/1086). Like wise prevalence of three government schools were 7% (30/429), 6.9% (28/413), 7.1% (22/308) respectively.

The prevalence of refractive error was insignificantly different among these government schools ($\chi^2 = 0.03$, df = 2, $p = 0.9$). But, refractive error was significantly high in private school than government schools ($\chi^2 = 6.7$, df = 1, $p < 0.01$). Age distribution of refractive error was not significantly different between private and government schools. But male students of private schools had significant prevalence of refractive error ($p = 0.01$) than male students of government schools.

**Magnitude and distribution of refractive error in school children**

The magnitude of refractive error is given in Table 4. Myopia was the most common refractive error in 44.8% (86/192) followed by astigmatism (34.9%) and hypermetropia (20.3%). Myopia of 2.0-6.0 D was the most common type of refractive error in 48.8% Similarly astigmatism less than 1.0 D and hypermetropia less than 1.5 D were common in 61.2% and 66.7% students. Distribution of magnitude of myopia, hypermetropia and astigmatism was insignificantly different between male and female.

Overall, mean score for myopia, hypermetropia, and astigmatism was $-2.8D \pm 1.9$ (Range, $-0.5$ to $-9$), $+2D \pm 1.3D$ (range, $+1D$ to $+6D$), and $-0.8DC \pm 1.2$ (range, $+1.8$ to $-4D$) respectively for confidence interval of 95% Emmetropia (Figure 1) was observed in 1762 (78.8%) whereas hypermetropia around +0.5 D after cycloplegic refraction was observed in 282 students (12.6%).

At the age of 5-7 years (Figure 2), mean score for myopia was $-0.9 \pm 0.7$ (range, $-0.5$ to $-2.25$). It was increased to $-1.7 \pm 1$ (range, $-0.5$ to $-4D$) at the age 8-10 years, $-2.7 \pm 1.7$ (range, $-0.5$ to $-6.5D$) at the age 11-13 years,
and $-3.8 \pm 2$ (range, $-1$ to $-9$ D) at the age 14-16 years. At
the age 5-7 years, mean score for hypermetropia was
$+1.8 \pm 1$ (range, $+1$ to $+4$ D). Mean score for hypermetropia
was increased to $+1.7 \pm 1$ (range, $+1$ to $+4$), $+2.1 \pm 1.6$
(range, $+1$ to $+6$) at the age 11-13 years and then decreased
to $+1.8 \pm 1.3$ (range, $+1$ to $+4$ D). At the age 5-7 years, the
mean score for astigmatism was $-0.5 \pm 0.9$ (range, $+1$ to
$-1.5$ D). Astigmatism was found increased to $-0.7 \pm 1$
(range $+1$ to $-2.5$ D), $-1 \pm 1.4$ (range, $+1.5$ to $-4$), and
$-0.9 \pm 1.3$ D (range, $+1.75$ to $-2.5$ D).

Other ocular abnormalities

During the time of screening, other abnormalities were also
seen. They were convergence insufficiency in 1.8%
conjunctivitis in 1.3% glaucoma suspect in 1.2% squint in
0.9% lens related (Pseudophakia, aphakia, congenital
cataract) in 0.4% chalazion in 0.2% and nystagmus in 0.2%
These students were referred to Mechi Eye Care centre for
further evaluation and management. Hence, a total ocular
morbidty including refractive error was seen in 14.6%

Discussion

Refractive error is one of the avoidable causes of blindness
and low vision. It can restrict progress in education, limit
career opportunity and restrict access to information. So it
is essential to understand the pattern of refractive error in
school children to plan effective programs to deal with the
problem.

The prevalence of refractive error among school children
in this study was 8.6% (3.9% myopia, hypermetropia 1.7% and
3% astigmatism). The prevalence of unaided, presenting
and corrected visual acuity worse than 6/12 (0.5) was 3.8%
2.6% and 0.2% respectively in our study. Thirty-five children
had spectacle during assessment of presenting visual acuity,
24 students had visual acuity 6/6 with spectacle. In the
Pokhrel (2000) report, unaided, presenting, and best
corrected visual acuity worse than 0.5 (6/12) at least in one
eye was 2.9% 2.8% and 1.4%. In the same report, the
prevalence of refractive error was reported 4.8% (hyperopia
in 1.4% myopia 1.2% and astigmatism 2.2%). The
prevalence of refractive error was found higher in our study
compared to Pokhrel (2000) report although both studies
were conducted in Jhapa district. Our study was conducted
in school children while the Pokhrel report was population
based. Cycloplegic refraction was not conducted in all cases
in our study as compared to Pokhrel report. Description
of prevalence of refractive error was also different in our study
from Pokhrel report. In Pokhrel report, the prevalence of
myopia was described as $-0.5$ diopter or less in either eye,
hyperopia 2 diopters or greater in either eye, and
astigmatism of 0.75 cylindrical diopter or greater. In contrast
to that, we assigned myopia as $0.5$ diopter or more in better
eye, hypermetropia 1 or more in better eye, and
astigmatism $0.75$ or more in better eye. However, our finding
was comparable to other school based reports, e.g. Nepal
(2003) found 8.1% in Kathmandu, Niroula (2009) reported
6.4% in Pokhara, Kassa (2003) reported 7.6% in Ethiopia,
and Kalikivayi (1997) reported 7.4% in India. But different
prevalence rates were found in other population based

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 Magnitude of refractive error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type and magnitude of refractive error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&lt; 2$ D</td>
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<tr>
<td>$2-6$ D</td>
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<tr>
<td>$&gt; 6$ D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypermetropia</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\leq 1.5$ D</td>
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<tr>
<td>$&gt; 1.5$ D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astigmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\leq 1$ DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&gt; 1$ DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p significant at 0.05 by chi-square test in different types of refractive errors.

Figure 1 Distribution of refractive error in school children.

Figure 2 Age distribution of mean refractive error.
Refractive error in private school children was observed in 10.3% of the students (112/1086) and in government schools was seen in 6.9% (80/1150). It was significantly higher in private school children than government school children (p < 0.01). Comparable findings were reported by Niroula (2009) in 9.24% private and in 4.29% government school students, by Pokhrel (2010) in 11.8% urban and 8% rural school children, and by Ali (2007) in 44 children in government school and in 63 children in private school. The prevalence of refractive error was significantly different between males in private school and males in government schools. Private school students came from more privileged families compared to government school students. Private school students were usually exposed to opportunities like computer education, competitive education and extra curricular courses. These could be some of the possible reasons which have to be explored.

Ocular morbidity in our study (14.6%) was seen slightly higher than ocular morbidity in the Nepal (2003) report at 11%. The reason could be the lack of awareness and poorer accessibility to eye care system in Jhapa than Kathmandu. Mechi eye hospital is the only eye hospital that has been providing comprehensive eye care and screening services in the Jhapa district of Nepal since 1996. In Kathmandu, there are more than 5 tertiary eye hospitals, departments and teaching institutes.

Finding of the prevalence of refractive error is the major cause of visual disability in school children in Jhapa. The most encouraging fact about the visual disability is that it can readily be correctable in 97.4%(187/192) with spectacle correction. Though programme has to be focused on all type of refractive errors, more provision is required to reduce or eliminate visual impairment due to myopia in elder students. Though ethnic distribution of prevalence of refractive error is not studied and exclusive coverage of schools is not attended, there is no reason to suspect that students studying in other part of schools or area in Jhapa can experience refractive error different from students studied in enrolled schools. Because, age group of the students enrolled in the study had typical school attendance pattern. There is an apparent need for parental as well as school education programs along with effective strategies for providing school-based vision screening, quality optometric services, and provision of providing affordable spectacles.

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Conflict of interests
Authors declare that they don't have any conflict of interests.

References


