Section: Medical Education

Original Research Article

BLENDED LEARNING AND SIMULATION-BASED ASSESSMENT IN COMMUNITY-ORIENTED PEDIATRIC MEDICAL EDUCATION

Manveer Singh[1], Aarti Agarwal[2]

[1]*Associate Professor, Community Medicine, Dr SS Tantia Medical College, Hospital and Research Center, Sriganganagar, India.*
[2]*Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics, ESIC Medical College and Hospital, Faridabad, Haryana, India.*

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Corresponding Author:
Dr. Aarti Agarwal,
Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics, ESIC Medical College and Hospital, Faridabad, Haryana, India.
Email: dr.aarti1234@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Traditional methods of medical education often struggle to adequately prepare students for the complex challenges of delivering pediatric care within the community context. The increasing burden of childhood illnesses and the need for integration of preventive, promotive, and curative approaches underscore the urgency for innovative teaching strategies. Blended learning, which combines digital education with face-to-face instruction, along with simulation-based assessments, may offer a holistic and immersive educational experience for medical undergraduates. **Objectives:** To evaluate the effectiveness of a blended learning approach integrated with simulation-based assessment in improving knowledge, clinical skills, and confidence among undergraduate medical students studying community-oriented pediatric topics.

Materials and Methods: A quasi-experimental study was conducted among 100 MBBS students in their 6th and 7th semesters at a private medical college in North India. The students were divided into two groups: an intervention group (n=50) exposed to a structured blended learning module incorporating pediatric simulation, and a control group (n=50) taught using conventional lectures. The learning module focused on community-relevant pediatric conditions such as pneumonia, diarrhea, malnutrition, immunization, and neonatal care. Pre- and post-intervention assessments were conducted using MCQs, Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs), and structured feedback surveys. Data were analyzed using SPSS v25.

Results: Students in the intervention group showed a significant increase in post-test knowledge scores (Mean = 82.4 ± 6.3) compared to the control group (Mean = 74.2 ± 5.9, $p<0.001$). OSCE evaluations revealed superior performance in the domains of history taking, physical examination, communication skills, and clinical decision-making. Student feedback reflected high satisfaction, with 92% reporting increased confidence, and 90% expressing a preference for the blended learning approach.

Conclusion: The integration of blended learning with simulation-based assessment significantly enhances medical students' understanding and application of pediatric concepts in community settings. This educational model aligns well with CBME goals and holds promise for broader implementation.

Keywords: Medical education, Blended learning, Pediatrics, Community medicine, Simulation, OSCE, Competency-based education, Undergraduate training.

INTRODUCTION

Medical education in the 21st century is transitioning from rote memorization to competency-based, outcome-driven approaches. This evolution is driven by the realization that students must not only acquire knowledge but also demonstrate clinical competence, especially in domains with high community relevance such as pediatrics and public health.[1]

Community medicine and pediatrics share a common focus on prevention, early intervention, and context-specific care. In India, diseases like pneumonia, diarrhea, and malnutrition continue to be leading causes of morbidity and mortality among children under five years, particularly in rural and underserved areas.[2] Traditional didactic lectures have limited ability to simulate real-life clinical scenarios or engage students in active problem-solving related to such public health priorities.

Blended learning, which combines the advantages of online self-paced content with in-person interactive instruction, has emerged as a potential solution to bridge the theory-practice gap.[3] Simultaneously, simulation-based education offers safe, repeatable environments where students can practice essential skills, make decisions, and receive structured feedback without risk to actual patients.[4]

This study aims to assess whether the combination of blended learning and simulation-based assessments can enhance learning outcomes in community-oriented pediatric topics for undergraduate medical students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design: A quasi-experimental study was designed with a control and an intervention arm. The study duration was three months, and ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee.

Study Setting and Participants: The study was conducted in the Department of Community Medicine. A total of 100 MBBS students in their clinical phase (6th and 7th semesters) were enrolled. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained.

Intervention

- The intervention group (n=50) underwent a structured blended learning module consisting of:
  - Online learning content hosted on the institutional learning management system (LMS), including recorded lectures, interactive quizzes, and discussion forums.
  - Face-to-face sessions featuring case-based discussions, peer-led seminars, and practical demonstrations.
  - Simulation-based training, using both pediatric manikins and standardized patients for scenarios like IMNCI evaluation, immunization counseling, ORS preparation, and assessment of a malnourished child. A pediatric consultation for validation of content was also done from an independent peer.

Control Group

- The control group (n=50) received conventional didactic teaching through lectures and tutorials covering the same topics.

Assessment Methods

1. Knowledge Evaluation: Pre- and post-intervention tests using validated MCQs (30 questions covering applied aspects of community pediatrics).
2. Clinical Skills Assessment: OSCEs comprising 10 stations evaluating history taking, examination, counseling, and clinical decision-making.
3. Student Feedback: A structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale assessed perceived usefulness, engagement, confidence, and overall satisfaction.

Statistical Analysis: Data were analyzed using SPSS v25. Paired t-tests compared pre- and post-intervention scores within groups; unpaired t-tests compared between groups. Categorical variables (e.g., satisfaction levels) were analyzed using chi-square tests. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Baseline Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Characteristic	Intervention Group (n=50)	Control Group (n=50)	p-value
Age (years, mean ± SD)	21.2 ± 1.1	21.0 ± 1.0	0.312
Gender (Male/Female)	28 / 22	26 / 24	0.693
Previous Pediatrics Posting (%)	40%	38%	0.825
Urban/Rural Background	34 / 16	32 / 18	0.669

The table presents baseline characteristics of participants in the intervention and control groups, each comprising 50 students. The mean age was comparable between groups (21.2 ± 1.1 years vs 21.0 ± 1.0 years; p = 0.312). Gender distribution was similar, with a slight male predominance in both groups (28/22 in intervention and 26/24 in control; p = 0.693). Prior exposure to pediatrics postings was reported in 40% of the intervention group and 38% of the control group (p = 0.825), and the majority of participants in both groups had an urban background (34/16 in intervention vs 32/18 in control; p = 0.669). None of these differences were statistically significant, indicating that the two groups were well-matched at baseline and that any subsequent differences in outcomes can likely be attributed to the educational intervention rather than pre-existing group differences.

Table 2: Pre- and Post-Test Scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean ± SD	Post-Test Mean ± SD	p-value
Intervention	62.1 ± 7.2	82.4 ± 6.3	<0.001
Control	61.5 ± 6.8	74.2 ± 5.9	<0.001

Table 2 compares the pre- and post-test scores between the intervention and control groups. The intervention group showed a significant improvement in scores, with the mean increasing from 62.1 ± 7.2 to 82.4 ± 6.3 ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, the control group also demonstrated a statistically significant gain, with scores rising from 61.5 ± 6.8 to 74.2 ± 5.9 ($p < 0.001$). Although both groups improved after the teaching sessions, the intervention group achieved a greater increase in mean scores, suggesting that the blended learning and simulation-based approach was more effective than conventional teaching methods in enhancing student performance.

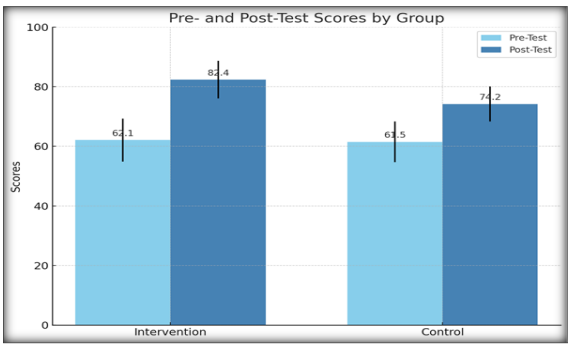

Figure 1: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Test Scores between Groups (Bar chart showing improvement in knowledge, with a steeper rise in the intervention group.)

Table 3: OSCE Performance

OSCE Domain	Intervention Mean ± SD	Control Mean ± SD	p-value
History Taking	8.6 ± 0.9	7.1 ± 1.1	<0.001
Physical Examination	8.2 ± 1.0	6.9 ± 1.3	<0.001
Communication Skills	8.9 ± 0.7	7.4 ± 0.8	<0.001
Management & Decision Making	8.4 ± 1.2	6.8 ± 1.4	<0.001

Table 3 presents the OSCE performance scores across four clinical skill domains for both intervention and control groups. The intervention group consistently outperformed the control group in all domains, with significantly higher mean scores: History Taking (8.6 ± 0.9 vs. 7.1 ± 1.1), Physical Examination (8.2 ± 1.0 vs. 6.9 ± 1.3), Communication Skills (8.9 ± 0.7 vs. 7.4 ± 0.8), and Management & Decision Making (8.4 ± 1.2 vs. 6.8 ± 1.4). All differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). These results indicate that the blended learning and simulation-based training substantially enhanced students' clinical competence, particularly in communication and decision-making skills, compared to traditional teaching methods.

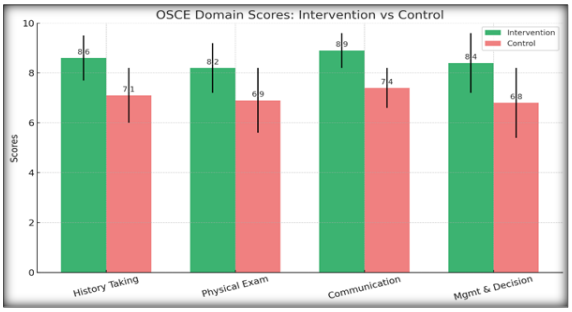

Figure 2: OSCE Score Comparison (Bar chart comparing mean scores across OSCE domains between both groups.)

Student Feedback Summary

- 92% of students in the intervention group reported increased confidence in managing pediatric cases.
- 88% agreed that simulation scenarios reflected real-life community health issues.
- 90% preferred blended learning over traditional lectures.
- Qualitative comments praised the structured feedback and hands-on exposure.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with the global trend toward competency-based, student-centered medical education, which emphasizes not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of skills and attitudes relevant to clinical practice. Our results showed that the intervention group, which received blended learning integrated with simulation-based assessment, demonstrated significantly higher improvements in both knowledge and clinical skills compared to the control group. These outcomes support the hypothesis that blended learning and simulation are superior to traditional didactic methods in promoting educational effectiveness.[5]

The theoretical underpinning of our approach is supported by constructivist learning theory, which asserts that learners build new knowledge through active engagement and experience. Yardley et al. have emphasized that learning, particularly in community and primary care contexts, must be contextual, experiential, and reflective to be effective.[1] Our study addressed this by integrating community health topics into the blended curriculum and using realistic simulation scenarios that reflect the challenges faced in pediatric care within community settings.

The efficacy of blended learning in medical education has been well documented. A meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2016) found that blended learning led to significantly higher knowledge scores compared to traditional instruction across various health professions (standardized mean difference: 0.81; 95% CI: 0.57–1.05).[7] Similarly, Xiaolan et al. demonstrated improved academic performance and engagement in community medicine using a blended learning model, consistent with our findings.[3]

Simulation-based education (SBE) has gained recognition as an effective tool for developing clinical competence. Issenberg et al. in a landmark review concluded that high-fidelity simulation is most effective when integrated into the curriculum with feedback and repeated practice, improving both clinical decision-making and patient outcomes.[6] Similarly, Okuda et al. highlighted that simulation enhances critical thinking and preparedness for real-life patient encounters.[4]

Recent Indian studies also support our findings. Nair et al. (2024) showed that pediatric simulation improved confidence and clinical judgment in final-year MBBS students. Their randomized controlled trial found statistically significant improvements in OSCE scores and satisfaction with simulation-based training.[8]

The integration of community-oriented learning with simulation-based assessment addresses both public health priorities and educational outcomes. Khan et al. (2023) reported that a simulation-integrated module on childhood malnutrition improved both cognitive understanding and practical skills among interns posted in community medicine.[9]

Furthermore, incorporating formative assessment through simulation enables constructive feedback, a key driver of learning. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) supports formative simulation-based evaluation as a strategy for promoting reflective practice and continuous improvement.[10]

Our study contributes to this growing body of literature by demonstrating the feasibility and efficacy of blended learning combined with simulation in the Indian undergraduate context, particularly in community pediatrics, where there is often a lack of structured clinical exposure. The approach enhances clinical reasoning, decision-making, and community awareness, aligning with the goals of the National Medical Commission's Competency-Based Medical Education (CBME) framework in India.

In summary, the integration of blended learning and simulation in community-oriented pediatric education not only improves knowledge and skills but also fosters reflective, competent, and socially responsive future physicians. Future studies should assess long-term retention and real-world clinical impact of such curricular innovations.

Limitations include the study's single-institution setting and potential performance bias due to faculty involvement in both teaching and assessment. Future research should include long-term follow-up, assessment of retention, and multicentric validation.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning combined with simulation-based assessment is a transformative educational strategy in community-oriented pediatric training. It significantly enhances student engagement, knowledge retention, and clinical preparedness. Given its alignment with CBME principles and relevance to child health indicators, this model is recommended for broader adoption in undergraduate medical curricula.

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