

Early Childhood Education in Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Mahenaz Mahmud & Amima Sayeed

Teachers' Resource Centre

The significance of Early Childhood Education at individual, community and societal levels has long been established through research and inquiry (GMR- UNESCO, 2007). Emerging scientific evidence and experience from the fields of neuroscience, education, human ecology, economic development, social sciences, child protection and health sciences make it crystal clear that quality ECCE is critical to creating a world with productive and strong communities that just, healthy and sustainable (Shonkoff, 2010). Recognizing the criticality, Early Childhood Education and Development has received an international academic and policy thrust; the very first goal for Education For All calls for expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education (Dakar Framework for Action, UNESCO 2000).

As a response to international emphasis on ECCE, the National Education Policies (1998-2010 and NEP 2009 and the National Plan of Action on EFA (2001-2015) were developed identifying ECE as a separate policy focus. As a long term target, the NPA declared 50% enrollment for 3-5 yrs age group by 2015 to be achieved through a phased approach (20% in Phase I ending in 2006 and 40% by 2011 as Phase II target). The reason for keeping modest target was identified as low priority as compared to primary education and adult literacy (NPA, GOP, p. 63). The more recent National Education Policy (2009) made a significant departure from the strategy and targets laid out in NPA. NEP (2009) declares that “significant progress, and the EFA mid-term targets for ECE have been met with “ as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for Early Childhood Education (ECE) rose quite remarkably from 36% of all children aged 3-4 years in 2001-02 to 91% in 2005-06 and 99% in 2007-08” (NEP 2009, Annex A, p. 65). While as a policy action, NEP states “provision of ECE shall be attached to primary schools which shall be provided with additional budget, teachers and assistants for this purpose”, it contradicts its claim of 99% enrollment by targeting universal access of “at least one year preprimary education” by the State to be “ensured within the next ten years” (Chapter 5, section 5.1, pg 35).

ASER 2010 data, collected over 10, 000 children of ECE age group (age 3-5) across Pakistan, clearly reveal that the NEP claims of 99% enrollment do not reflect on the ground reality. Of the total 10, 246 children 55.3% children are out of school with nearly 49% of girls. Of the 44.7% who are enrolled in some kind of ECE, the share of government school enrollment is 61.7%, therefore, the universal access as well as provision of ECE by State both seem as distant, almost unachievable targets. However, with the disparate strategies and targets in two core policy documents, the educational system does not have a clear focus.

Moreover, the ECE facilities are to be attached with primary schooling, as stated by the NEP. The budget for education is projected and allocated on the basis of sub-sectors such as primary, secondary and vocational education, and areas like teacher education and library. While the share of primary education in the total budget averages at 40%, it does not ensure that ECE is covered for. First, a major percentage (estimated at 90%) is utilized for teachers' salary and operational expenses of schools such as building repair and utilities, leaving very little for programmatic expenses or even availability of basic learning resources.

Second, and more critically, the formula used for calculating the needs of a primary school, includes, 5 teachers for 5 years of primary, and a school (if at all) comprising of five rooms. ASER 2010 Survey indicates that average number of rooms used for conducting classes at primary level in government schools is 2.9. Data from elsewhere identify that teacher allocation in rural primary schools averages at 1-3 teachers for 6 classes. This formula for school-budgeting and allocation neither provides the resources nor the space for proper regularization and integration of ECE (Katchi class) as per the policies and commitments. The process of budgeting both at federal and provincial levels, is in itself so elusive with little or no involvement of teacher educators, ECE experts or programme staff, that determining the sense and educational value of allocations is often impossible.

Policy targets for ECE will stay at document level if they are not reflected and aligned with the budgets allocated for schools, and that too in an integrated fashion. Separate teaching positions need to be created for ECE along with basic provision of learning resources. As was witnessed with the ESR Action Plan, stand alone programmes and promises of resource allocation for initiatives like creating ECE centres are not realized. Either through inclusion within the primary cycle or creating separate budget lines for ECE, projection and resource allocation for setting up and regularizing ECE classes across the public sector is critical.

A major achievement on part of the Ministry of Education, despite a massive shuffling of policy makers and individuals involved in the initial process, is that it has retained the National Curriculum on ECE (NCECE) and its core philosophies. When the curricular review was undertaken in 2006, the Curriculum Wing, Federal MoE ensured that the NCECE is enriched keeping its

central tenets intact. Similarly, doing away with paper-pencil examinations is another marked achievement in an otherwise jaded examination system. More recently, the NEP marks training of teachers according to the NCECE framework as core strategy for quality improvement. The ground reality again is different from the intended outcomes mainly because there is no strategic framework for the implementation of a well-researched, child-centred NCECE, with current fiscal and capacity gaps. The minimum requirement if the State is serious about expanding and improving ECE as per EFA commitments, is to teachers' orientation to the National Curriculum and the fundamentals of ECE. Therefore, improving the capacities at planning level, especially to ensure the depth and quality of programmes, should become a priority. Many of the implementation hurdles will be overcome if ECE is integrated in the fiscal planning and operational systems.

ASER 2010 Survey indicates that over 36% of ECE enrollment is catered through non-state education facilities (with varying ratios across Pakistan e.g. Gilgit 82%, KPK 53%, Sindh 15.4% and Balochistan estimated at 9% enrollment). The participation of private education providers is significant in terms of their size; however, this does not guarantee quality teaching and learning (as reflected from ASER findings on learning levels across grades). Public sector does not only have the responsibility to create quality models and ensure their implementation across sectors; it also has considerable capacity in ECE implementation at classroom with a number of teachers trained through technical agencies in ECE. The issue remains that these capacities are neither properly channelized nor are their insights built upon. As a result, these potential change makers are either working in isolation in some remote school or are too inundated with compliance duties that they do not use their potential and expertise. The jurisdictions, turfs and territories within and across administrative units and provinces make it more difficult to pull the critical mass back together for planning and implementation of programmes.

For policy makers and concerned citizens, ASER findings on ECE group should act as a wakeup call. With every delay in policy or curriculum implementation, the future of Pakistani children is put in jeopardy. Along with losing the critical years for human development, they also lose out on the opportunity and potential for becoming a life-long learner and contributing positively to the society.

