

Early Childhood Education in Pakistan: *Realizing the Right to Early Start*

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The criticality and advantages of Early Childhood Education are now established from biological, social, economic, cultural and human development standpoints. The need for quality and encompassing ECE programmes is emphasized strongly because research proves that it positively impacts the physical, psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional development of the child, including the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Children are active learners from birth, and the early years are vital to their success in school and later in life. Most importantly, investment in ECE and development programmes holds strong opportunity to break the cycle of inequities and poverty that has plagued millions of lives in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Pakistan's education system stands at a critical juncture with the constitutional decree of Article 25-A declaring Education as the fundamental right for children of 5-16 years of age. In addition to its own constitution, Pakistan is also bound by international commitments and treaties. The Joint Declaration for Education For All stated that learning starts at birth. Ten years later, the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action reaffirmed this and 180 world leaders signed up to the Education For All goals where Goal One is to expand early childhood care and education. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is the most extensive international treaty on the rights of children, commits states to ensuring the rights of all children on the basis of equal opportunity. Moreover, the UN Committee on the CRC calls on states to recognize that children are active participants in decisions affecting them and to pay special attention to the neglected area of early childhood. However, with all the international and national bindings, there is little progress that has been made to ensure the rights of children to education as ASER 2011 reveals that 32.3% of children at age 5 were not enrolled in any school facility whereas Of 32,323 children surveyed in the 3-5 age group, 57.3% un-enrolled and only 42.8% were enrolled (girl's enrollment also stands at 42.2%).

Half of the critical period of Early Childhood years (0-8 age group) falls in the schooling age i.e. from age 5-8 years. While there is a growing emphasis on getting children enrolled in school, the real question is whether the schools

are ready to induct young children and provide them with a thriving, curious, and positive learning environment. Are there adequate healthy spaces in the school to provide children breathing space? Is the teacher available to nurture and facilitate a batch of 35 or 50 young learners? Are there learning resources to make their experience challenging yet a fulfilling one? Do the teachers, if available, aware of the significance of ECE years and possess the skills and attributes of a quality caregiver for ECE? The findings from ASER 2011 respond to these questions to a large extent, and all the answers are in negative. The average number of rooms used for conducting classes at primary level in government schools was around 2 whereas in private schools, average number of primary classrooms was 4. Looking at as basic indicator as room availability, it becomes clear that providing a well-lit, ventilated, decent learning space for young learners to move around, engage in interactive activities and Plan-Do-Review cycle will be next to impossible. It is then no real surprise that ASER 2011 has found that more children in 3-5 age group are not enrolled in schools compared to ASER 2010 survey findings.

ASER 2011 also challenges the misplaced notion of ECE or Pre-Schooling as an urban phenomenon primarily catered through private education service providers. Of the total enrolled, 67.6% children were enrolled in government schools, 29.3% in private schools, 2.7% in madrasahs and the remaining 0.4% are enrolled in other types of schools such as non-formal day cares or literacy centres. Looking at the huge numbers approaching government schools for ECE, the public planning and financing wings cannot further delay action on the policy promulgations and provisions pertaining to ECE. It is the twelfth year since the National Education Policy called for regularization of Katchi in National Plan of Action and Education Sector Reforms-Action Plan, and third since the National Education Policy 2009 declared that "provision of ECE shall be attached to primary schools which shall be provided with additional budget, teachers and assistants for this purpose." Pakistan has a tremendous advantage with a national ECE policy, research-based curriculum and local expertise in the field of ECE especially in the NGO sector for running effective, large-scale ECE quality programs. It must build on the available experiences and expertise to operationalize the national ECE framework. The failure to implement

policies is a failure of political commitment and education system as such. Pressure must be generated from all sections of society in order for the State, public and private education providers as well as donor agencies to fulfil their obligations to young children.

Pakistan has a tremendous advantage with constitutional provision, focused ECE National Plan and Education Policy, a cutting edge research-based National Curricular Framework that has been implemented both in diverse types of schools and has proven to be effective, and a valuable cache of experiences especially amongst the NGO sector to undertake teacher development and run large scale quality ECE programmes. With a shift in its educational financing priorities and evidence-based planning, the critical gaps can be closed that are currently impeding the expansion and improvement of Early Childhood Education. This will entail the following:

- 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. There is no hope for policy implementation until it is reflected in the budget documents of ECE, and that too in an integrated fashion. Separate teaching positions need to be created for ECE along with basic provision of learning resources. In the wake of RTE, this cannot be overemphasized as quality ECE experience cannot be provided without any teachers, space for children to breath and move around, and learning resources.
- There is a serious lack of coordination and alignment of targets. For ensuring that policies within and across ministries are implemented in their true spirit, it is critical for various stakeholders to come together and review the numerous documents, frameworks and overlapping roles and responsibilities and collapse them into few, decipherable and achievable plans. Concurrently, determining the lead organizations/ministerial units accountable for service provision and quality is imperative.
- There is no substitute for teacher training and provision of basic learning resources, if the purpose is to impart quality ECE in the public sector. Though follow-up support adds to the chances of uptake, however, the basic pre-requisites for running an ECE set up is that the teacher has an understanding and the skills to engage children in meaningful learning experiences. All existing and newly inducted teachers must be taken through a basic orientation of National ECE Curriculum and provided learning resources to ensure active teaching with young learners.

- Public sector has “developed capacities” for quality ECE programmes and their implementation at all levels trained hundreds from the cadres of teachers, supervisors and decision makers under a lot of NGO and donor-supported initiatives. It is imperative to properly channelize and build upon these capacities. The 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 make it more difficult to pull the critical mass back together for planning and implementation of programmes. If these administrative hurdles are cleared out, the public sector has a very strong chance to emerge as a lead ECE implementing agency. Moreover, it can develop models of capacity utilization which other organizations can build upon.

Investment made now in ECE policies and programs will bring large future returns to individuals, families, communities, and nation at large. The damages of ignoring critical phase of human development are irreversible as we are experiencing them today, and any defense mounted is not enough to secure the people and the nation. The malaise of poverty, terrorism, discrimination can be addressed by taking a proactive approach and protecting the next generations from it. The call for action is deafening as ASER 2011 findings demonstrate yet again. It is for each citizen, as a collective and an individual, to demand for political commitment and play a vital role in safeguarding children and giving them a promising future.