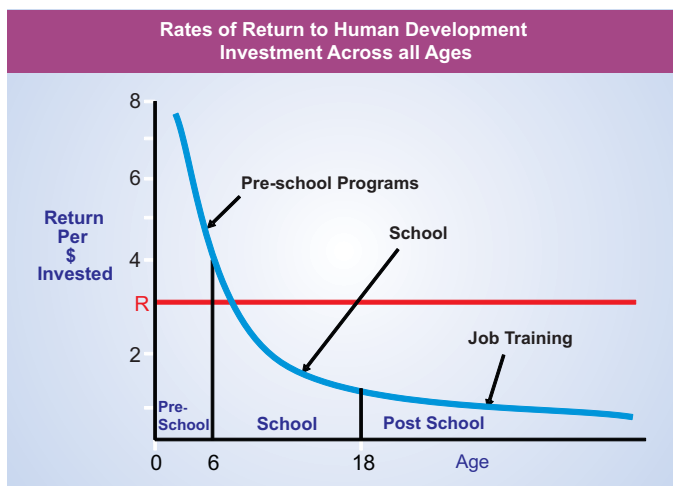


Get it early, Get it right: Early Years' Education in Pakistan

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Early Childhood Education, for children of age 3-8 years, is seen as the essential basis for holistic human development with supporting research evidence from economic, sociological, neurological, medical, and human development perspectives (GCE, 2012). Through multi-disciplinary research, it is demonstrated how healthy development in the earliest years of life builds the foundations of successful adaptation and effective learning that lead to better outcomes in academic achievement, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, and economic and human development (Shankoff, 2010). In addition to the societal and human gains, there are strong rate of return for investment in services in the early years. According to Nobel Laureate James Heckman, delayed investments in ECE massively diminish economic benefits as can be seen in the following figure. Internationally, the World Bank and other agencies have estimated the rate of return at \$3 for every \$1 spent, and returns double when the most vulnerable children are targeted.



Pedro Carneiro, James Heckman, *Human Capital Policy*, 2003

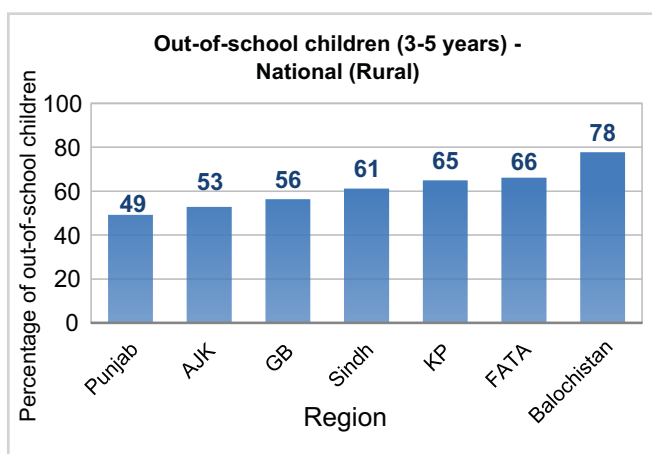
The ECE picture in Pakistan does not take account of research insights and evidence despite the international and national commitments made over the years for improving and expanding ECE as reflected in National Education Policy, 2009, National Plan of Action 2001-2015). More recently, Article 25-A of the constitution guarantees free education for all children of age 5-16, which becomes binding decree for inclusion of at least 1 year of pre-primary education to every Pakistani child before s/he enters the primary schooling cycle.

ASER Survey 2012 once again highlights that the basic issue of access to Early Childhood Education is not addressed. Almost 63% children between age 3-5 years are not receiving any formal or informal education focusing on the core domains of holistic development. This is highest for age 3 children 91% of

them remaining out of school. While the percentage of out of school children significantly drops at age 5, with only 62.2 attending the school, the right to education ensured by Article 25-A is not realized for 37.8 % of children of the surveyed households across Pakistan. For the pre-primary

% Children who attend different types of pre-schools						
Age group	Govt.	Non-state providers			Out-of-school	Total
		Pvt.	Madrasah	Others		
3	6.0	2.9	0.3	0.1	90.7	100
4	21.2	10.3	0.6	0.3	67.6	100
5	45.5	15.4	0.9	0.4	37.8	100
3-5	26.2	10.0	0.6	0.3	62.9	100
Total	37.1				62.9	100
By type	70.5	27.0	1.7	0.7		

age group (3-5yrs), provincial figures are even more alarming with the lowest range at 50% out of school children in Punjab and highest at 78% in Balochistan. It is important to reiterate here that these figures are based on the ASER Survey of 4,033 villages in 80,209 households in the country where a total number of 57,503 children (47% girls, 53% boys) were found in this age group. The estimates done by provincial governments are sometimes even higher than the trends shown through ASER 2011 and 2012 data (for e.g., Balochistan).



The real question that ASER 2012 points at is why it is so difficult to develop and implement legal and implementation frameworks for providing ECE at a large scale despite the endless process of policy advocacy, policy formulation, and availability of cutting edge curriculum, teaching and research capacities within Pakistan? Is it the lack of intent to secure better future for children of Pakistan and in turn strengthened citizenry? Or are the political and systemic forces

unconvinced of the staggering impact good quality early years' education has on not only achievement levels in later years but also life- long learning. It is imperative to seek answers to these questions and also ensure that the State looks into the provision of at least one-year of quality Early Childhood Education as it is mandated by Article 25-A of the constitution. If the State in general, and Departments of Education in particular, are unable to establish as many schools for the 5 year old out of school children, then alternative spaces and their funding mechanisms should be looked into. The jaded justifications such as lack of resources, systems' capacity, political will and so on for continuing with the inaccessible and sparse provision of Early Childhood Education do not remain acceptable owing to the short and long-term significance of ECE on literacy, school completion, learning achievements and overall human development.

The quality of ECE provision for those 37.1% children of age 3-5 years attending some education facility is more often than not inadequate. Of the 37.1%, 26.2% are enrolled in a government school while 10.9% enrolled in non-state facilities (with the highest in private schools i.e. 10% and 0.6% and 0.3% in Madrasahs or other type of non-state facility respectively). Although gauging the learning outcomes for age 3-5 years is not in the current scope of ASER study, data on indicators pertaining to school facilities in public and private sector inform the quality of ECE service provision as well. For instance, the average number of rooms available in government schools is 2.3 whereas for private schools it stands at 4.1 at primary level. Similarly, only 31% government schools and 39% private schools are found to have a playground or safe play area where children could play.

Speaking of simply the physical spaces and security, the readiness of schools for young learners is fairly questionable. Do the schools, private or public, provide a learning environment which is conducive to their holistic development and if not that, only cognitive development? It is a question that merits serious deliberations and concrete steps.

Pakistan, in the last two years, has seen several efforts for educational improvement – some have only focused on missing facilities in schools, others have singularly targeted teachers' professional development or increasing literacy rates. However, both the scope and scale of these efforts (even when successful in their own right), is limiting when it comes to setting strong foundations and getting it right at the very first step of learning ladder. The time has come to urge the public and private educational planners, policymakers and investors to look at the bigger picture and develop strategies that are nuanced to the needs of an early & solid start to education. The provincial education sector plans in most provinces have included ECE as a separate strand (for instance, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab) since 2011. From one year to another, the rolling out of these plans again is made conditional to legislative approvals and budgetary resources. It is critical for the Civil Society to mobilize parents, children and every citizen of Pakistan to push the State to deliver. After all, another delay will not only jeopardize the promising start children must get to realize their innate potential but also deprives Pakistan a chance of becoming a peaceful, productive and conscientious nation vis-à-vis social and economic parameters.

