

# WHAT THE ASER 2016 DATA TELL US ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION - AND WHAT WE STILL NEED TO KNOW

Saba Saeed,

Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA)

Kate Anderson,

Project Director and Associate Fellow in the Center for Universal Education at Brookings

The positive impact of investing in high-quality early childhood education programs that prepare children to succeed in school and later in life has been well documented. The period of a child's life from conception to age 8 is evidenced to be the most crucial period for well-being and development<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that 250 million children under age 5 are at risk of poor developmental outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (Early Childhood Development 2016: The Lancet<sup>2</sup>). Poverty, nutritional deficiencies, poor health care, and insufficient learning opportunities are cited as the key factors underpinning these failings. Heckman's well-cited research and more recent evidence from the Lancet Series on Child Development and the Young Lives studies in several developing country contexts support the claim that inequalities and gaps that start early in life persist and widen through later schooling years<sup>3</sup>. Addressing inequalities in both access to early learning experiences as well as the quality of any early learning programs accessed in early years, therefore, is an important agenda for policy makers. In recognition of its value, Early Childhood Education (ECE) has increasingly been made a priority in country driven sector policies, plans, and laws and is also reflected in the adoption of SDG 4.2 by UN member states.

The last 15 years have seen numerous initiatives in policy and implementation across Pakistan to make free pre-primary education and early childhood care for 3-5 year olds a reality. From the positive innovation of ECE service delivery across Pakistani government schools that incorporated targets and some resource allocations for provinces and other areas throughout the country to support ECE as an innovation through the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) Action Plan 2002-2006, the sub-sector is well articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009. While little research has been done nationally on availability and effectiveness of early childhood education services, the limited data available<sup>4</sup> show that these initiatives have encountered challenges with system effectiveness and capacity of providers to deliver quality

services, amongst other factors. The government commitment for ECE covers only ages 4-5, missing an important opportunity to begin supporting children's learning and development in critical 0-3 years. All current Provincial Education Sector Plans (2014-2020) in Pakistan have included ECE, but largely as a one-year provision in government and public sector financed schools.

ASER Pakistan in recent years has taken a significant step forward in providing fresh perspectives into the scale of early learning progress and challenges both in terms of access and quality. The latest ASER data from 2016 on enrollment and learning present an interesting story.

**Table 1: ECE Enrollment - Comparison of years 2014, 2015 and 2016**

Enrollment			Government			Private		
2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016
39.2	36.7	36.4	51.1	70.1	62.6	48.9	29.9	37.5

The national rural picture shows a consistent decline in the percentage of children enrolled in ECE, albeit more in 2015 than 2016. However, disaggregating the data by type of provider uncovers a mixed trend. Whilst the ASER data from the last 3 years have shown that more children are attending government-led ECE programs than private programs, the comparison between 2015 and 2016 shows an interesting pattern. Enrollment across government ECE programs rose sharply in 2015 from 51.1% to 70.1% where the gap between government and private appears the largest and then fell again in 2016 to 62.6%. In the same years, the enrollment in private ECE programs decreased in 2015 from 48.9% to 29.9% and then increased from 37.5% in 2016. There could be a number of explanations for the shifting patterns in government/private enrollment. Expansion of government-led ECE programs in public schools in 2015 is one possibility. Quality concerns in government ECE programs might explain the shift to private sector again in 2016. However, further research is needed to substantiate these assumptions and

1. UNICEF, Early Childhood Development: The key to a full and productive life

2. Full text available at [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)31659-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)31659-2/fulltext)

3. Heckman, J. J. (2008): Schools, skills and Synapses. Economic Inquiry 46: 289-324, Woodhead, M., Dornan, P. and Murray, H. (2013), *What Inequality Means for Children*, Oxford: Young Lives, Murray, H. (2012) *Is School Education Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children?: Factors Shaping Education Inequalities in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam*, Young Lives Policy Paper 6.

4. UNICEF, Early Childhood Education and Development, Country Report 2015 Pakistan

offer insights into what other factors could have contributed towards the shift nationally.

In addition to data on ECE access, the ASER 2016 data on learning assessments for class 1 children provide some insights into the types of skills children have around the time they begin formal schooling. ASER measures among Class 1 students the ability to read simple words in Urdu, identify letters in English, and recognize numbers 0-9. These tasks are stated as goals for all young children in Pakistan per the national Early Learning and Development Standards and National ECE Curriculum.

**Table 2: Percentage of Class 1 children able to complete tasks Comparison of year 2014, 2015, and 2016**

Percentage able to read simple words in Urdu			Percentage able to recognize small letters in English			Percentage able to recognize numbers 1-9		
2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016
31.5	27.3	27.3	36.3	32.5	34.3	69.0	70.0	70.7

The table above shows that only around a third of children can do the literacy tasks by Class 1, and in some cases there have been declines from year to year in the percentage of children who demonstrate these skills. Results for mathematics are more promising, but still 30% of children are unable to recognize single-digit numbers. Clearly there

has been progress made in expanding access to ECE, but the ASER 2016 data raise the possibility that quality may have decreased as a result of this expansion.

An emphasis on access and learning must be present in efforts to expand early childhood education. This requires monitoring systems that collect accurate and meaningful information on children’s development, learning outcomes and general attributes of ECE program quality, such as how the teachers interact with children, what facilities exist, whether or not learning materials are available and used, and what pedagogical approaches are used with young learners. With ECE policy frameworks articulated in Sindh, Balochistan, and KPK and an upcoming one in Punjab which reiterates the governments’ commitment to promote ECE, there is an opportunity for Pakistan to use data to inform service provision in ECE. While ASER provides a brief snapshot of access and learning outcomes in early childhood, we need more initiatives which take a deeper look at children’s development and learning outcomes in the personal and social domains as well as literacy/numeracy to determine what developmentally on track means in Pakistan. This will also help in supporting the foundations of Right to Education 25-A.

