

EARLY LEARNING PROGRESS IN PAKISTAN- RECENT EVIDENCE FROM ASER 2015-19

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Over the recent past, there has been an enhanced focus on Early Learning, or Early Childhood Education (ECE) across the globe and within Pakistan. An abundant wealth of research studies demonstrate that early childhood education and development can significantly influence future education and development trajectories for a child¹ and has consequential, long-term and attestable socio-economic effects². Among the global stakeholders, a consensus has been established that acknowledges these future gains. Consequently, ECE has been encoded into future development plans internationally including the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which sets out the larger framework for ECE for the next decade or so by enjoining governments to 'ensure by 2030 that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'³.

In Pakistan, intermittent reforms efforts have materialized across the country for early learning in the last half of the decade to ensure that children aged 3-5 are enrolled in quality pre-school education and well-prepared for primary education. As a signatory to SDG 4, as well as constitutionally promising quality education, Pakistan has invested a considerable amount of technical and human resources in ECE. It is worth exploring, through country-wide datasets such as ASER, on how far these reform efforts have affected progress in enrolment and school preparedness in ECE.

Reform Situation

In Pakistan, especially within the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, ECE has gained increased system-level attention and relevance in recent years. In the three out of the five Right to Education Acts for Article 25 A (a fundamental constitutional right of all children aged 5-16 years), ECE has been included by provincial governments as a target area of support for 3-5 years. Sindh was the first province to develop a holistic ECCE policy in 2015, which focused towards establishing developmentally appropriate pre-primary ECCE that will support learning preparedness for primary schools to improve child outcomes in the province. The Sindh government has also developed its official provincial ECE curriculum as well as initiated workforce reforms with a designate cadre for the subsector. Balochistan created an ECE policy framework in 2015 which addressed the main challenges facing the subsector in the province. However, there are serious challenges in ECE implementation in the province.

Soon after Sindh, the Punjab government finalized its first ECE Policy in 2017, which clearly incorporated a systems-based approach to the subsector. This was followed up by provisions and plans for ECE in New Deal 2018-23⁴ which has a dedicated section on improving and scaling high-quality pre-primary education across Punjab as well as the introduction of a provincial scheme of studies for ECE.

1. Barnett, W. S. 1995; Miller-Johnson, S. 2002; Ramey and Ramey 2013

2. The Heckman Equation, "Four Big Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Development," available at <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/4-big-benefits-of-investing-in-early-childhooddevelopment/>

3. <https://indicators.report/targets/4-2/>

4. The New Deal 2018-2023 is a landmark document for education announced in December 2018 and launched in February 2019 by the School Education Department (SED), Government of Punjab has dedicated a section to pre-primary education

ECE features as a key priority area in education sector plans of all provinces. Sindh's most recent provincial education sector plan (2013-18) had specific objectives and improvement areas for early learning. Similarly, Punjab's latest five-year Education Sector Plan 2019-23 also pinpoints specific gaps in ECE throughout the province including 1) low enrolment in multiple ECE grades with significant variation in age of children as well as intra-regional and rural-urban differences, 2) low parental engagement which serves as a significant impediment to child learning outcomes, and 3) service-delivery and institutional challenges particularly with workforce recruitment and ECE financing⁵.

Moreover, the monitoring mechanism in Punjab has been further strengthened through the Assistant Education Officers (AEOs) stationed at district level, responsible for school clusters. The AEOs provide monthly reporting on ECE classrooms to their respective deputy district education officers (DDEOs) and provide advice to head teachers. A monitoring app has been developed based on MELQO by the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) and PMIU which is now fully operational and collects continuous data on early childhood in each school.

To address major gaps in the subsector, the provincial government has planned key priority programs relevant to ECE including scaling-up of ECE in low-enrolment districts through a mixture of improvement in infrastructure, enrolment campaigns, reducing school costs for parents' through social protection measures, and partnerships with the private sector. There is also a growing realization, in both Punjab and Sindh, that School Committees or Councils (SCs) can play an effective role in overseeing ECE service-provision at the local level and bringing out-of-school children into classrooms.

Conversely, despite the flurry of activity in the sub-sector, there are very few initiatives in Pakistan that provide evidence on the cognitive and/or psychosocial development outcomes of children in early years. Whilst the governments in Punjab and Sindh have adopted commendable measures (such as the monthly monitoring of ECE classrooms) to improve the quality of data and for tracking learning assessment, the current data collection system is not designed to fully measure the quality of the ECE program and development outcomes of children. There is also limited data on enrolment & transition rates and clarity on ECE terminology. With multiple pre-primary streams (the traditional grades of katchi/nursery/pakki and a more recent introduction of a better provisioned ECE) running concurrently in government primary schools, there exists ambiguity around what constitutes an ECE provision. There is lack of data for distribution of age patterns of children enrolled in ECE as well information on the proportion of out-of-school children.

The Annual Status of Education Report-ASER survey (2008-2019) and Multiple Index Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by ITA and UNICEF respectively attempt to generate data on early years but each of these initiatives has its own limitations; ASER uses Grade 1 as a proxy for pre-primary learning whilst MICS is an indirect assessment of children in that it collects information from parents/teachers on child development outcomes in selected domains.

However, ASER data captures information on enrolment for all types of preschool grade before grade 1, which have different terminologies such as katchi, pakki, nursery etc. Moreover, ASER's large sample spread across all provinces and touching upon far-off districts offers us a coherent evidence-based on ECE. ASER is a particularly relevant evidence-base for the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan where early learning reforms and activities have only recently started materializing.

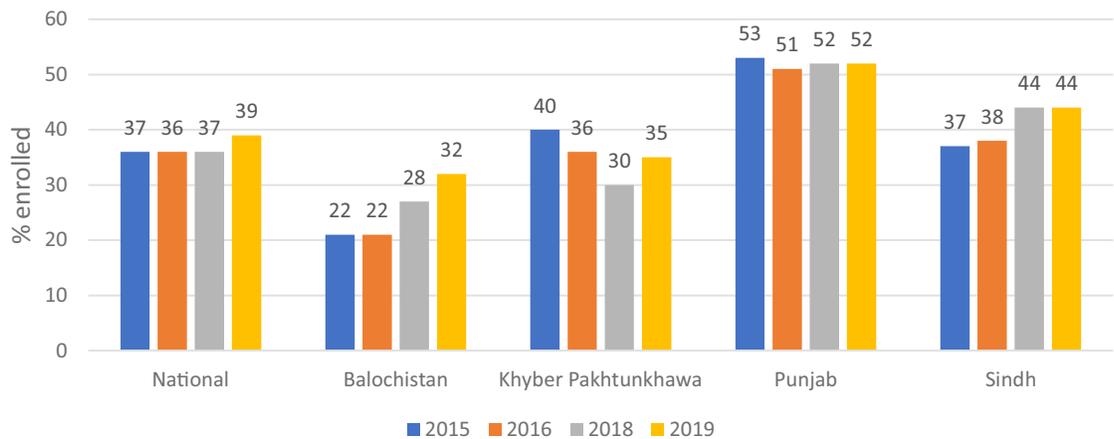
Progress Evidence from ASER 2015-19

Enrolment

At the national level, ECE enrolment has improved slightly during 2015-19 from its previously static figures- it is 2% up. There has been a steady increase in enrolment figures for the province of Balochistan as ECE enrolment has improved by almost 10% in this four-year period. Sindh has also registered incremental improvement in enrolment figures from 37% enrolled in ECE classrooms in 2015 to 44% in 2018 and 2019. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has shown a slight recovery in enrolment figures from 2018 when the figure drastically fell to a mere 30%.

On the other hand, the enrolment figures from Punjab- otherwise a pioneer in ECE reform efforts- have shown remained static and hovering in the same range. Although overall, Punjab still leads all the other provinces in the percentage of children enrolled in ECE, there has been limited upwards progress.

Figure 1: ECE Enrolment (2015-19)



School Preparedness

School preparedness as a result of ECE can be gauged via learning levels for children who've transitioned from pre-school and are enrolled in Grade 1. The ASER data has a specifically designed tool that quantifies learning levels for children in all grades within three specific domains:

- i. local language reading skills
- ii. english reading skills
- iii. arithmetic skills

These three domains are also comparable to and coherent with the national and provincial curriculums. According to the National Curriculum Framework 2006, there are certain competencies children are expected to have by the end of Grade 1 including, but not limited to:

- i. ability to read and understand basic sentences, and short stories in a local language
- ii. ability to read letters, words, sentences and short stories that the student is familiar with
- iii. recognize numbers up to 100, add and subtract two-digit numbers, and be familiar with abstract concepts like time and date.

For local language reading skills, there have been uneven changes but with overall improvement at the national level. The percentage of children with completely beginner/no level of reading skills has gone down from 31% in 2015 to 27% in 2019. However, it is slightly up from 2018 when the percentage had gone down to 24%.

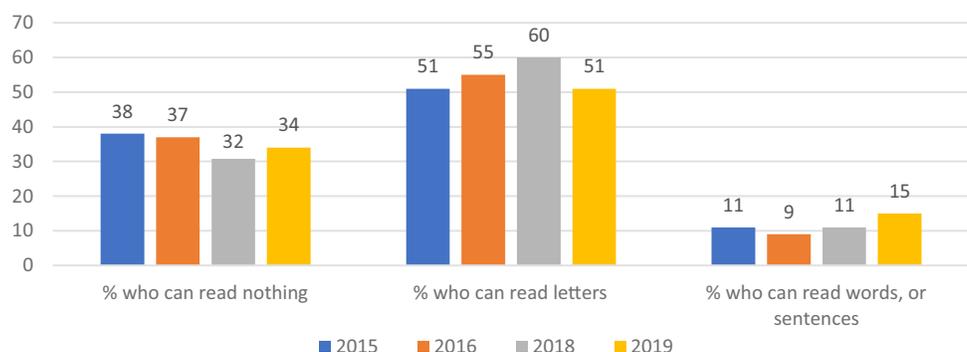
However, the most significant progress in the last year has occurred with higher level of skills as almost 36% of children can read words, sentences and stories (up from 27% in the previous three years).

Figure 2: Local Language Reading Skills

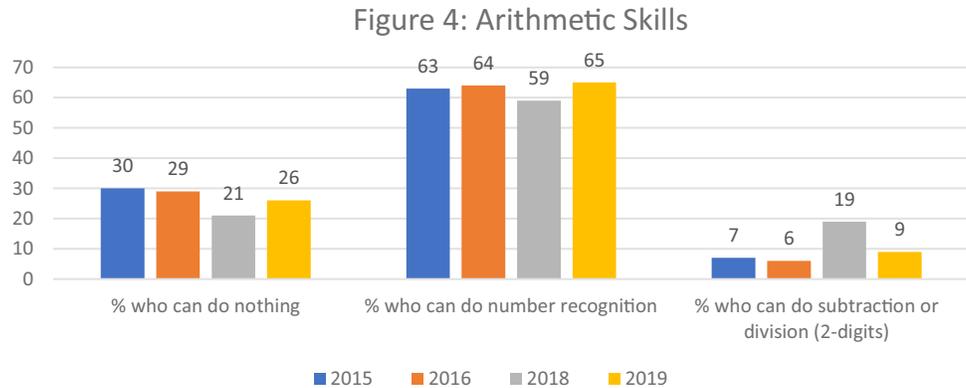


There has also been uneven improvement in English reading skills across the country. While the percentage of children who can read words or sentences in the English language has incrementally moved up to 15% from a mere 9% in 2016. However, in 2019, children who have no/beginner-level skills in English reading has gone up to 34% from a 28% in 2018.

Figure 3: English Reading Skills



Over the years, there has been an overall increase in the percentage of grade 1 students who can recognize numbers and do subtraction and division with 2-digits. However, some gains in from 2018 do not show up in 2019 as the percentage of students who have no arithmetic skills has increased by 26% and proportion of students who can do subtraction and division has reduced by almost 10%, indicating a regression in learning outcomes across the country.



Overall, enrolment and school preparedness figures have indicated progress but there is still a need for further mobilization in this area. However, 2019 figures show slightly decreased learning levels compared to the last year. It is worth investigating the specific reasons for this lower performance across the country to understand why reforms towards learning levels are not producing required outcomes. Additionally, the low-enrolment districts in all provinces- also pinpointed in some of the latest sector plans- should be targeted for increased enrolment. However, this provides limited data on early learning in Pakistan, and particularly with regards to out-of-school children, transition rates, gender, and specific learning environments. To inform better policy, there is a need to collect data and figures on these themes.

There are upcoming research initiatives that address these data gaps including the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Phase II household survey which will gather information on household conditions, learning and development outcomes, and program quality in several districts of Punjab and Sindh.