A growing body of literature points to the importance of educational qualifications of preschool teachers and specialized training in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in predicting children’s learning levels and development.¹ Better qualifications, more specialized training and friendly teaching methods have not only been found to affect the cognitive abilities of children in a positive manner in the short run but have also been associated with the long run learning competencies of children.

However, in Pakistan, a country where 88% of the primary public sector teachers have only the Professional Teaching Certificate (PTC) as their maximum professional qualification, there is little importance given to Early Childhood Education². Even if the need for specialized trainings in ECE is stressed in the education sector plans of all the provinces of the country, there is no defined criteria for hiring ECE teachers.


² Status of Teachers in Pakistan
Since ECE is the very basic aspect of education which impacts child learning and development, the positive effects of a good ECE program on the learning competencies of children is something that cannot be ignored, especially in a country like Pakistan where the children’s learning abilities are depreciating every year (Annual Status of Education Reports 2008-13).

Children’s Learning Levels: What does ASER 2013 tell us?

According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2013, the learning levels of children across Pakistan, in English, Arithmetic and Language (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto) are deplorable. Half of Grade 5 students cannot read Grade 2 level story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto. Moreover, 57% of Grade 5 students cannot do Grade 2 level division and/or cannot read Grade 2 level sentences in English.

The learning competencies of children are much worse at the lower grade levels. For example, in Grade 1, 31% children cannot read basic letters in local language (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto) and 39% cannot read capital letters in English. These results have deteriorated over the past one year because in 2012, 28% of Grade 1 children could not read basic letters in their local language (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto) and 37% of these children could not read capital letters in English.

Judging from the learning levels of children in initial classes, it is no surprise that the learning competencies of children in later classes, as mentioned earlier, are very poor. This is because, despite a slight increased enrollment in ECE as compared to last year³, a vast majority of students do not attend early childhood education centers, or any other form of pre-schooling (Fig 2). Even if children do attend preschools, the lack of good teachers, who are trained specially to make learning child-friendly and fun, might result in hindering child learning and development. One of the major reasons for this can be attributed to the lack of emphasis on proper Early Childhood Education policy making with respect to qualifications of teachers.

Early Childhood Education- Existing Policies

Early Childhood Education was, for the first time, declared as an integral and important aspect of education, in the National Education Policy 2009. It was stated that there is a need to focus more on ECE because, in Pakistan, there is no clarity on what is being taught in preschools and schools often do not have the capacity (including the expertise of teachers) in conducting ECE classes. Although the curriculum for ECE was developed in 2002, there is little that has been done to train teachers especially for preschools. Efforts to train teachers are minimal and done on a project basis only⁴.

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³ ASER National Report 2013
⁴ Sindh Education Sector Plan, 2013
Although the provincial sector plans for KP, Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh emphasize on the issues of ECE in detail, the main solutions provided only include the introduction and institutionalization of formal Early Childhood Education (ECE) at primary school level⁵. Additionally, almost all the sector plans stress on the development of ECE training modules.

As far as pre-service training is concerned, the Balochistan Sector Plan focuses on specialized training for preschool teachers. However, there is no mention of the minimum qualifications required for an ECE instructor. The education sector plan for Sindh too discusses in detail the issues of ECE and questions how the teacher-student ratio in the province can be 1:1000. However, the proposed solutions given in the sector plan only point to investment on hiring new teachers and not on the minimum qualifications required or on making learning more child-friendly.

If the provincial governments seek to take the issues regarding ECE seriously, it is imperative that they do not only invest in hiring new teachers but also give more attention to the quality (both higher qualifications specialized trainings in child friendly teaching methods) of teachers. Following are some of the recommendations for policy formulation.

**Recommendations for Policy Makers:**

1. **Better and Minimum Qualifications for Newly Hired Teachers**
   Declare a minimum qualification and a specialized professional degree (in ECE), which will both be same across all provinces, a must for teachers who would be hired to teach 3-5 year olds in registered early childhood education centers. Although a minimum qualification needs to be declared, the government should focus more on the experience and expertise of teachers teaching ECE.

2. **Specialized training for Newly Hired Teachers**
   Conduct specialized training for newly hired teachers to make them aware of the curriculum that is to be taught to 3-5 year olds to better prepare them for further education. Further, it needs to be made sure that these teachers have a better understanding of making the schools child friendly in order to retain students and increase enrollment. New interactive methods need to be incorporated in the teaching manuals and it needs to be made sure that these methods do not only help make learning more child-friendly but are also based on things that can be easily taught and retained by ECE teachers.

3. **Professional Development Support for Existing Teachers**
   Design capacity building and professional support/teaching programs in such a manner that the existing preschool teachers are incentivized to obtain the minimum qualifications required to become an ECE teacher.

4. **Salary and Benefits**
   Pay preschool teachers better salaries to motivate more teachers to be hired for preschools. These salaries can also be linked to the performance of children to ensure teachers take their job seriously. Increasing the salaries would increase the costs for the respective provincial governments but the costs can be offset by increased economic returns to tax payers from better and improved public educational programs.

5. **Education and Training Institutions**
   Support universities to design effective educational degree programs and hire exceptional faculty to make certain that the needs of the preschool teachers are met. The programs introduced by these universities must equip the future teachers with the best teaching practices, knowledge of child development and the skills required to teach a highly diverse population⁶.

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⁵ KP Education Sector Plan, 2013
⁶ Barnett 2004
6. **Introduce ECE Assessments and Make Evidence Based Improvements**

Introduce the concept of standardized assessments in Early Childhood Education and use these assessments to not only gauge the child's performance at school, but also determine the knowledge of teachers regarding the best teaching methods. In order to make the teachers more accountable, link the child's performance on these assessments to the additional bonuses of the teachers. Also, after these assessments, share the best teaching practices and encourage the good teachers by providing appreciation awards etc. Additionally, make appropriate changes in the future ECE policies using evidence from these assessments.

7. **Other Elements of Quality**

Although teaching has the most major role in ensuring better child learning and development, it is not the only reason. Along with hiring teachers with better qualifications and providing specialized trainings, government should also emphasize on improved curriculum, efficient monitoring and evaluation and strong supervision.

**References:**


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