

# TRANSFORMATIVE GAINS THROUGH INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS? THE CASE FOR FOCUSING ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

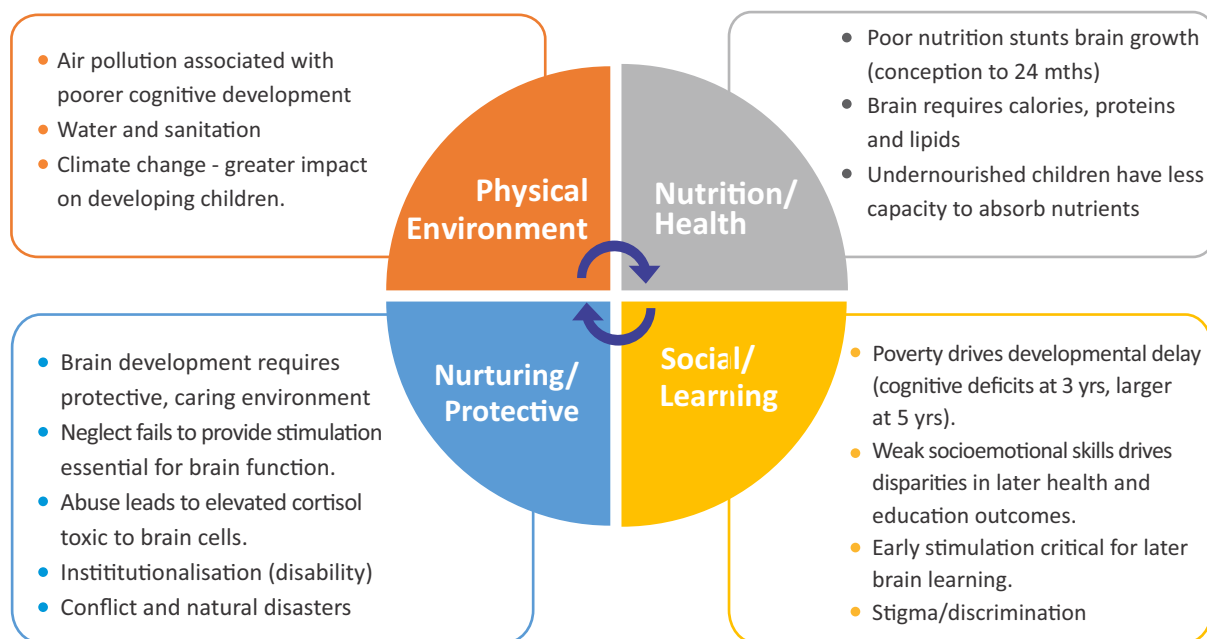
**Dr. Monazza Aslam**  
Director Research  
Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi

**Saba Saeed**  
Senior Program Manager  
Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi

**T**here is a strong case to be made for investing in a child's early years. The period from pre-conception to 8 years<sup>1</sup> in particular is a period of intense brain functioning and development. The foundations for lifelong learning and development are laid in these years of a child's life. Investing in this period can, therefore, not only be transformative in terms of the outcomes achieved but also cost-effective from a policy perspective.

However, child 'development' is influenced by multiple factors: healthy brain development needs good nutrition; protection from conflict and violence; a protective and caring environment and stimulation to encourage learning (see Figure 1 below which illustrates some of these factors). Children living in poverty or conflict settings, or those in poorly resourced environments are more at risk of facing multiple disadvantages with respect to all of these aspects. Most importantly, a child's developmental journey is both sequential (in that nutrition needs potentially override stimulation at birth as compared to later in life) and cumulative (i.e. a strong foundation results in further improvements and concurrently, poor investments in a child's development and well-being may result in a vicious cycle of perpetuating disadvantage).

**Figure 1: Factors Impacting a Child's Development in the Early Years**



1. Early childhood is formally defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as "the period below the ages of 8 years". Recognising that critical influences begin even before the child is born, the early childhood period typically constitutes the period from conception until birth as well.

## Providing early learning opportunities and preparing children for school is a worthwhile strategy...

Learning and stimulation form a core element of a child's development experience. The benefits of providing learning in the early years take shape not just in the development of cognitive skills but also in the improvement in mental health and psychosocial skills (Woodhead et al. 2014). International evidence points to some of these benefits: children who attended pre-school prior to enrolment in grade 1 in a selectin of Low and Middle Income Countries were found to have higher pass rates into second grade, have higher attendance and better learning outcomes in primary school, have lower dropout rates and higher retention rates and are less likely to need special or remedial education (Engle et al. 2011)<sup>2</sup>.



Investing in early learning can also prove beneficial for the entire education system. Like many developing countries, Pakistan has made huge strides in increasing provision and access across the education system and this is reflected in higher enrolment figures as compared to a few decades ago. However, whilst enrolments have increased, many of these children are entering into poorly resourced and ill-functioning systems resulting in high drop-outs, grade repetition and absenteeism particularly at the primary level. Providing children with the relevant cognitive support in the early years and primary years can, therefore, be seen as cost-effective strategy to reduce drop-outs, repetition, and other inefficiencies that place huge burdens on government systems and also influence the life and economic outcomes of millions who 'stumble at the first step' (Crouch and Merseth 2017).

There are a variety of means through which early learning opportunities can be provided to children in these critical years. These can take the form of pre-schools (e.g. kindergartens or pre-primary classes in schools/centres), conditional cash transfer programmes or accelerated school-readiness programmes. Their provision can be community-based, centre-based or home-based. They could be provided solely by the government or by a mix of non-state and private providers (such as faith-based organisations or NGOs) or through public-private partnerships between the government

2. Engle, Patrice L, Lia CH Fernald, Harold Alderman, Jere Behrman, Chloe O'Gara, Aisha Yousafzai, Meena Cabral de Mello, Melissa Hidrobo, Nurper Ulkuer, and Ilgi Ertem. 2011. "Strategies for Reducing Inequalities and Improving Developmental Outcomes for Young Children in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries." *The Lancet* 378(9799): 1339-53. OECD 2011 Does participation in pre primary education translate into better learning outcomes at school? Paris: PISA In Focus.

3. Zaman, S.S, Khanom,F., Rahman, N.F., Parvin, W., Begum, T., Khatun, R., Tofail, F. (2015), Effects of a Center Based Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP) on Early Child Development at Community Level in Rural Bangladesh, Research Report.

and non-state providers. However, as with all levels of education, the quality of provision remains of critical importance (with some evidence suggesting that quality centre-based programmes are most beneficial to disadvantaged children)<sup>3</sup>. This point is especially pertinent in contexts where education provision through the non-state sector is booming – Pakistan being a case in point with 36% of children aged 5-16 years enrolled in some form of non-state provision according to ASER 2018 data. In this context, the non-state sector can be an important player in expanding early learning but with a firm policy focus on maintaining the quality of this provision.

**Winds of change: the policy environment in Pakistan is giving increasing importance to early childhood learning...**

Clearly, ECE in Pakistan has increasingly been made one of the priority areas in national and provincial sector laws, policies, plans and now increasingly in financing. The National Education Policy (2009) provisioned for a formal early childhood education across all



primary schools and shifted the age band of primary education from 5 to 6 years, institutionalizing one year of pre-primary schooling.<sup>4</sup> This was reinforced by the Education Sector Reforms Action Plan (ESR 2001 – 2005) which guaranteed resource allocations for all provinces to successfully implement ECE via a strategic framework and plan of action. Soon after the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 2011 when education planning, policy and curriculum decision were completely devolved to the provinces, ECE began to be hugely emphasized as one of the priority areas of each provincial Education Sector Plans (2013/2014-2018) highlighting the development of an ECE policy and minimum standards as the first objective.

Sindh was the first province to develop a holistic ECCE policy in 2015 which was formally notified in 2017. The Sindh ECCE Policy is focused towards establishing developmentally appropriate pre-primary ECCE that will support learning preparedness for primary

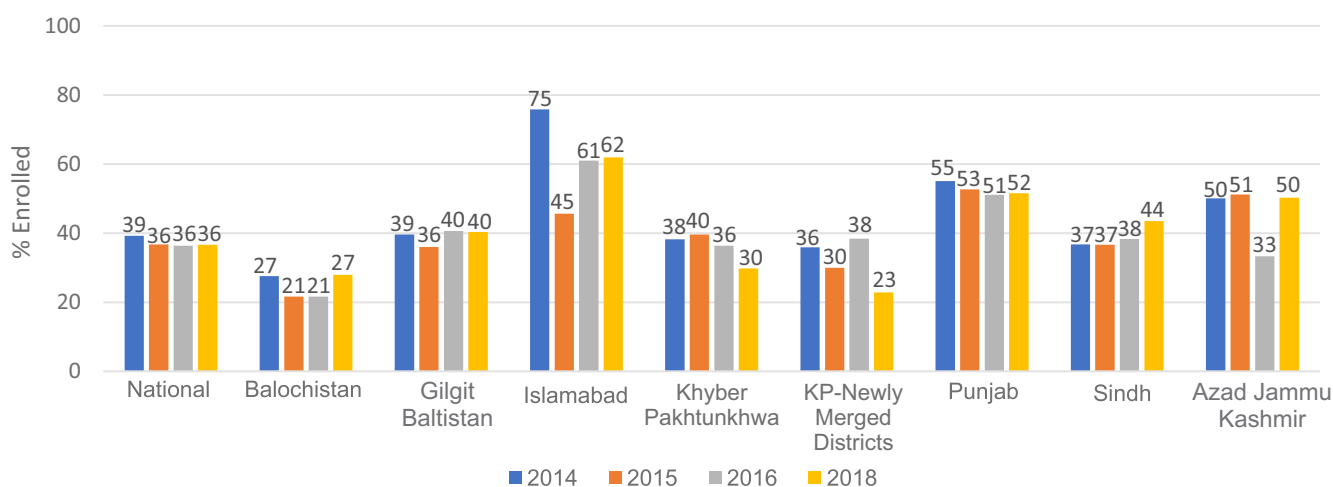
4. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001472/147222e.pdf>

schools to improve child outcomes in Sindh. Balochistan created a policy framework in 2015 and then Punjab became the second province to develop an ECE Policy in 2017 launched last year by the School Education Department. ECE Policy for Punjab (2017) reports data that adds interesting insights. The report notes that currently early childhood education is being offered by both government and private providers and is mainly centre-based and formal. According to Private School Census Data (2016-2017) reported in the Policy Document, 54,000 private providers in the Punjab offer early education through pre-nursery, nursery and prep. The public sector offers two main services: 1) traditional pre-primary classes/Katchi and 2) an ECE classroom or converted Katchi class which is similar to formal centre-based ECE provision that encourages play based learning through trained ECE teachers/caregivers. Traditional pre-primary classes or Katchi are being offered in 51,155 out of the total 52,819 schools in the province The Policy Document reports that according to Annual School Census Data (2016-17), Katchi enrolment in public schools is 2,246,358, compared to 684,564 in Pre-Nursery, 1,364,791 in Nursery, and 1,122,680 in Prep classes in private schools. The second type of structure is offered in more than 3,000 primary schools across 36 districts in the province (with 900 or so classrooms having been established with UNICEF support and 343 with support from Plan International). The document additionally notes that the aim is to achieve a target of 10,000 ECE classrooms by April 2018. It notes that the shift from play-based learning in ECE to book-based learning in grades 1-3 continues to be a challenging transition for children.

### Findings from ASER 2018 data

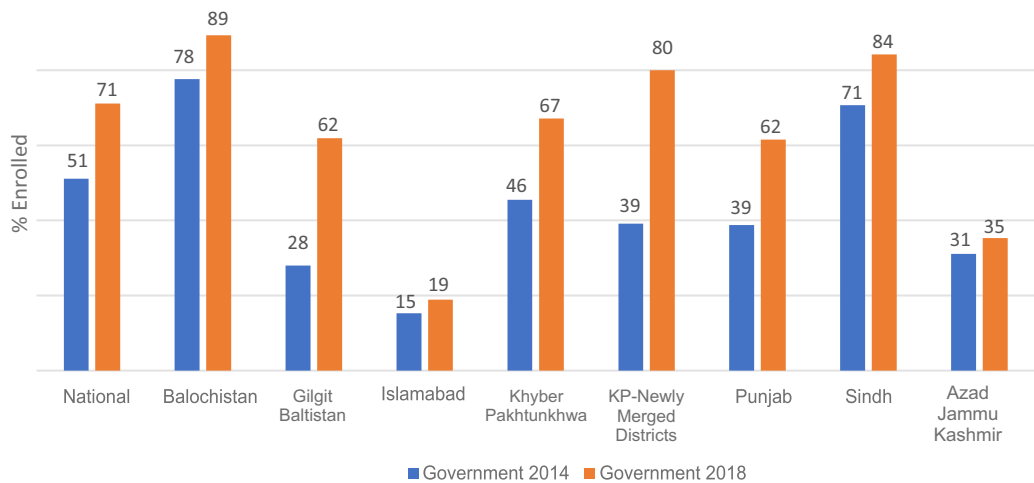
In the ASER data set, pre-primary class level encompasses everything before grade 1 and is referred to using multiple names – ECE (Early Childhood Education), katchi, kindergarten, nursery, paki, playgroup and prep. Information on enrolment (% children reported as being enrolled in pre-primary) has been collected since inception in the ASER report. Figure 1 illustrates ECE enrolment rates from 2014-2018 by location in rural Pakistan. A few patterns are very clear from this figure: i) at the national level, enrolment rates in the pre-primary level have remained fairly static over this 4 year period ranging from 39.2% in 2014 to 36.6% in 2018; 2) there is substantial disparity in enrolment by region with the highest rates observed in Islamabad (declining from 75.8% in 2014 to 61.9% in 2018) and some of the lowest in Balochistan (27.6% in 2014 and 27.9% in 2018) and in KP-Newly Merged Districts (declining from almost close to the national average in 2014 of 35.9% to a reported low of 22.8% in 2018).

**Figure 2: ECE Enrollment (2014-2018), by Location**

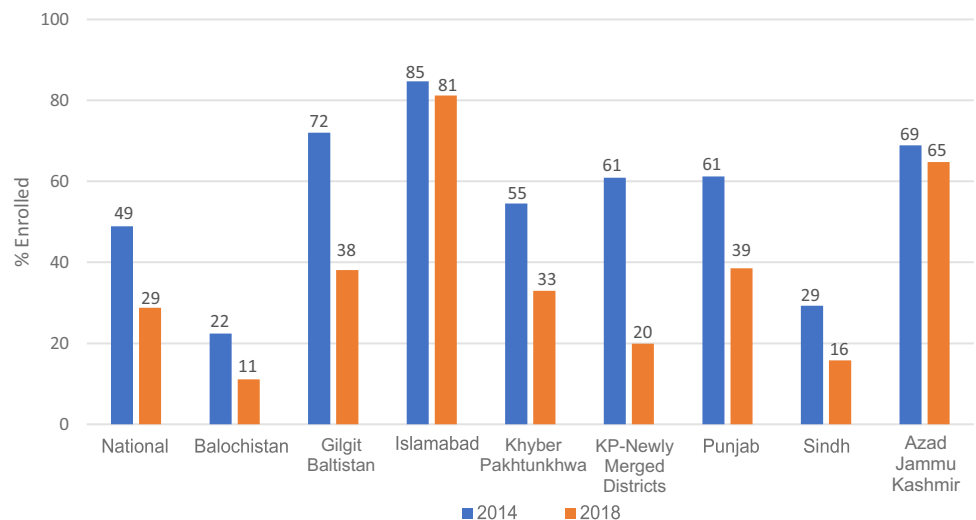


The government has been a key provider of early learning opportunities through pre-primary provision in the country. Figures 2 and 3 report ECE enrolment in government schools and private schools respectively (in 2014 and 2018 to provide a comparison over the 4 year period). Focusing first on Figure 2, it is clear that across the board, enrolment has increased in government pre-primary classes, in some instances very strikingly so. At the national level, for example, enrolment in government schools has increased from 51.1% in 2014 to 71.1% (a 20 percentage point increase over the 4 year period). Within Pakistan, the largest increases in enrolment over the four year period are seen in KP-Newly Merged Districts (an increase of 40.9 percentage points) followed by GB (a percentage increase of 33.9 percentage points). Correspondingly, enrolment in the non-state sector at this level has shown a substantial decline over this period (Figure 3) with the largest enrolment decline in the non-state sector observed in KP-Newly Merged Districts and GB.

**Figure 3: ECE Enrollment in Government Schools 2014 vs. 2018**



**Figure 4: ECE Enrollment in Non-State Schools 2014 vs. 2018**



In fact, Table 1 calculates the difference in enrolment at the pre-primary level across the four year period and it appears that the decline in enrolments in the non-state sector over this period maps directly onto the enrolment spike seen in government schools suggesting that children have 'moved' from the private to the government sector.

**Table 1: Percentage Change in Enrolment in Government and Private Schools (2014-2018)**

Location	% change G	% change P
National	20	-20.1
Balochistan	11.7	-11.3
GB	33.9	-33.9
ISB	3.6	-3.5
KP	21.6	-21.5
KP-Newly Merged Districts	40.9	-41
Punjab	22.7	-22.7
Sindh	13.5	-13.5
AJK	4.2	-4.1

### Conclusions and key recommendations

Because we know that early disadvantages can persist, intervening early should form an important aspect of policy. However, achieving large-scale provision of a suitable quality requires multiple factors: a cognizant policy environment sensitive to the needs of children in the early years as well as appropriate infrastructure to ensure policies can be effectively implemented. This includes, and is not limited to, the availability of a suitable, well-trained teaching cadre, facilities and curriculum targeting this age group.

