

A Study of Existing Early Childhood Education System in Pakistan

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Abstract

The Early Childhood Education is the backbone of any education system. However, ECE is still in developing phase in our country. The objective of the study was to analyze the existing situation of ECE system in Karachi Pakistan with reference to the standards set by international organizations for providing contextualized guideline for improvement. It was a descriptive research and sample of this study constituted of 50 ECE teachers from Public and private schools of Karachi and 20 parents of young children. Data was collected through semi structured interview. The interview protocol was prepared by using 8 standards of ECE derived from NAEYC, Michigan State Board of Education, Head Start, and National curriculum of Pakistan for ECE.

Findings of the study revealed that quality of ECE system differs in public and private sector. Most of the teachers in private sectors are aware with the philosophy, which is not the case of public sector schools. Majority of the teachers in public sector are not trained and same in private schools. Teachers have misconception about environment and climate, according to them wall decoration without objectivity is the only feature of ECE. Teachers from both the systems use teacher centered technique and emphasis on mechanical learning. There is no concept of community participation. Despite of huge funding in public sector for promotion of ECE system situation is not promising. Study recommends establishment of standards to improve the existing condition of ECE by focusing on professional development of teachers and involving community specially parents. This study will assist policy makers in developing standards for ECE in Pakistan and also address the shortcomings of existing system.

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is the formal teaching and care of young children by people other than their family or in settings outside of their homes. This includes integrating health, nutrition, and intellectual stimulation. Infants and toddlers experience life more holistically than any other age group. Social, emotional, cognitive, language and physical development take place and the experience of young children, fertile environment, the adults present in their surroundings, no matter family members or teachers play vital role in the development and learning of a child.

According to UNESCO ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) Unit, Early Childhood is the period from birth of the child till he reaches an age of 8 years. During this period a child undergoes remarkable brain development and these years lay the foundation for his subsequent learning and development.

The World Conference on Education for All (1990) declared that learning begins at birth. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) nominated the expansion and improvement of Early Childhood Care and Education as the first of its six global goals. A number of countries around the World have launched a variety of programs to meet their global commitment to the development of care and education services for their young children.

Pakistan is one of the signatories of the 'Education for All' movement of July, 1987. It had committed to accomplish the given targets by 2015. However, Pakistan is yet to implement a systematic program for Early Childhood Education. Pakistan lags 'far behind' in its progress towards meeting the goal of Early Childhood Education, though it has specifically mentioned its goal and strategic planning in National Educational Policies. The Education Policies of 1998, 2002 and 2009 have greatly focused on Early Childhood Education.

Presently in Pakistan there are two distinct and parallel systems of Early Childhood Education (ECE). In the public sector the prevalent ECE system for both formal and informal education for children aged between 3 to 5 years is termed "Katchi" meaning 'unripe'. The delivery system operates through public sector primary schools. Simultaneously in the Private Sector thousands of schools have been providing education to children aged 2+ to 6+ years. These institutes are running with the name of Nursery, Preschool and Montessori. As yet no proper system to impart standardized Early Childhood Education (ECE) or to regulate it has been evolved in the private sector schools.

It is a general perception that Ministry of Education (Federal & Provincial) is not planning or fulfilling the needs of the ECE. The quality as well as the availability of ECE has never been satisfactory even in the provincial capitals.

This is a serious situation asking for serious study and analysis. The startup of a serious discussion on this national problem is long overdue. An endeavor which had the potential of guiding us to some solutions even if they were not hundred percent correct should be made a national priority. This researcher hopes that her research on *“A Study of Existing Early Childhood Education System in Karachi Pakistan”* may play a vital role in finding, analyzing and providing solutions regarding these problems and many other such problems. This research is intended to establish some standards to evaluate the quality of our programs. This researcher hopes to establish some quality standards and criteria for evaluation.

Karachi with its broad diversity and plethora of problems, its various kinds of hurdles at every step is perhaps the best place for undertaking such an initial study. We have to seriously investigate what is being done wrongly at its pre-primary education levels. There are also some advantages and plus points. We have to build on these with dedication and determination. We have to keep the neglected areas in sharp focus and find workable solutions for overcoming our shortcomings.

The present research is of critical importance for policymakers at Federal and Provincial levels. The researcher hopes that the policy makers will appreciate the findings of the study to take appropriate decisions in this regards.

Focusing on the critical importance of early care and education for children, emphasizing on the role of family, society and those who are directly concerned with socioeconomic and human development the researcher feels that this research conducted has the potential to set a stage for finding new ways to meet the need for high quality Early Childhood Education for all children. New thinking is needed more than ever and it's the high time to implement the real spirit of ECE all over the country.

Methodology

The overall strategy of the research was descriptive, in which data collection process was done through a semi structured questionnaire, interviews, classroom observation and document analysis.

Tools

Questionnaire, Interview Protocol and classroom observation checklist.

Population

The population of the study consisted of all the Nursery, Montessori, and Pre School, ECE centers' teachers, Parents and Principals of public and private sectors of Karachi.

Sampling

The sample of this study consisted of 50 ECE teachers from Public and Private schools of Karachi and 20 parents of young children

Result and Discussion

In the light of the data collected from the selected samples the following emerged as findings and result.

1. Curriculum

There is a National Curriculum available for ECE and it defines clear objectives. However, teachers were not aware of the curriculum or the objectives or of any instructional strategies. There is a lot of variations in the syllabus of different private schools.

2. Professional development of teachers

Teachers in the private sector have some opportunities of training and development though there is a lack of need-based program in relation to the standard of ECE. However, teachers of public sector do not even get opportunities for focused ECE training programs. There are hardly any recognized institute for teachers training in ECE and big shortage of qualified faculty.

3. Conceptual understanding

Due to lack of training and development teachers lack clear understanding of ECE and its requirements. Private sector teachers do have some ideas but they are scattered. Teachers believe that wall decoration or board displays and coloring are the only aspects of ECE.

4. Community participation

Concept of community involvement is missing in both the systems. Teachers of public sector think that community involvement can create problems for teaching and learning process and parents will raise unnecessary arguments while in private sector parents think that children are no longer their responsibility. Once they have paid the fee the total responsibility is that of the school and the teacher.

5. Learning Resources

It was found that classrooms were not equipped with effective learning resources rather they were heavily loaded with colorful charts and pictures. Teachers in public schools do not get sufficient and relevant learning resources for ECE.

6. Climate

It is found that most of the time children are experiencing an environment which is not emotionally secured. They don't have right of choice and unrestricted movements.

7. Class room Teaching Practices

Most of the time classroom teaching is teacher centered in both the sectors. It was observed that teachers of private schools were using activity-based teaching method to some extent but teachers of public sector were mostly focusing on poem reciting. Children were listening to the teachers and moving here and there with confusion as to what to do!

8. Assessment Mechanism

The concept of assessment is not clear among the teachers of public sector. For example individual portfolios of students are not maintained. Ongoing assessment is not recorded effectively and life skills are not assessed. In both the systems conventional methods of assessment are still prevalent.

9. Environment

Private sector schools have provided a safe and secure physical and somehow effective learning environment for ECE classes. There are learning corners in the classrooms and they look well-furnished. In contrast public sector has not paid enough attention on this aspect.

Findings of the study revealed that quality of ECE system differs in public and private sector. Most of the teachers in private sectors are aware of the ECE philosophy, which is not the case of public sector schools. Majority of the teachers in public sector are not trained and same in private schools. Teachers have misconception about environment and climate, according to them wall decoration without objectivity is the only feature of ECE. Teachers from both the systems use teacher centered technique and emphasis on mechanical learning. There is no concept of community participation. Despite of huge funding in public sector for promotion of ECE system situation is not promising.

Discussion

Early learning covers crucial areas like quality program standards for Prekindergarten; Community collaboration; Physical and mental health, Nutrition and Safety; Learning environment, Curriculum; Child assessment and program evaluation.

Early learning expectations for three and four year old children are:

Intellectual development; social and emotional development; language; literacy; Creative development; Early learning of Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Early Skills in use of technology and many other topics related to Early Childhood Education.

The National Agenda for Early Childhood Education is being framed and different projects are being launched with the help of National and international donor agencies. There is a need to develop a coherent, integrated approach to early childhood policies and practices. However Allison Elliot (2004) rightly points out that moving through the 'complex patchwork' takes a large scale community involvement and collective will to implement any agenda.

Kindergarten schooling in developed countries like Australia, England and Germany had already started in the 19th century motivated by the need of working mothers to leave their small children in a 'home outside home' while they were at work. During the Second World War when a large number of women performed military duties, this need became more acute. Emphasis was also laid on the importance of delivering good quality care and good quality education for physical, psychological and social development of small children. Subsequently with the advent of progressive ideas, the right of work for women started to be demanded as a basic right.

Similarly the Right of the Children specially those of working women and those belonging to the lower income groups to receive quality care and quality preschool education started gaining due recognition. With renewed interest in Early Childhood Education and the realization of its key importance in building a cohesive, peaceful and progressive society a widely participated debate has started on connected issues. Many incisive research studies have been carried out and questions have been raised on the nature and efficacy of the ongoing programs in various sectors.

According to Allison (2004) Early Childhood Services should provide comprehensive development programs for children in the 0-5 age group. The nature of development and learning is connected and inseparable. However the divide between care and education appears to be growing haphazardly due to

the existence of “complex layers and connections between government, voluntary and church groups, public education systems, independent, catholic and other religious schools, community organizations, free market forces, small business owner operations, and major child care companies, plus of course families and children. (Somewhat similar to what we are presently doing in Pakistan) While the public sector has a large part in providing preschool and kindergarten services, the child care is entirely looked after by the private sector, although most of these are non-profit concerns. Despite the divide between childcare and education both of these services are considered to be well developed and well established by international standards. The reason for this situation can well be the general acceptance and realization of the truth that early childhood programs have a substantial positive impact on children’s social and cognitive development that these are cost effective in the long run and contribute to overall improved educational performance for all children especially to the disadvantaged children.

The trend to integrate childcare and education can result in a provision that day care units may also start providing preschool education to prepare children under their care for formal schooling. There is no fixed age in many countries for children to start schooling by Day Care. As a matter of fact the government of New South Wales has made it compulsory for Childcare centers for more than 30 children to employ at least one ECE trained teacher in their center.

On the other hand the preschool and kindergarten prepare children only for formal schooling and provide education programs for a year or two before their schooling starts. Besides dedicated preschool buildings situated adjacent to schools in large communities there are also for very small towns preschools that may operate for only one day in a week. For very remote rural areas mobile schools have been provided which continue to move from one community to another. One very interesting experiment is the establishment of toy libraries from where children can borrow toys. This concept provides the training for understanding the working, preservation and upkeep of toys as opposed to the practice of destroying toys by our children.

Quality of environment for ECE is highly important. Better quality environments facilitate better learning outcomes. Thomas, J 2007 pointed out the following in order to make ECE effective:

- In order to bring about enriched learning environments it is essential that better qualified staff is provided.
- Children optimize their learning and development when they participate in high quality programs or those programs which focus on

specific areas of development such as early literacy, social and moral development.

- In centers where childcare and development would be integrated children will show enhanced cognitive, language and social development.
- The outcome of high quality programs will be maximized when community support will be mobilized
- If individual learning needs of children are looked after by trained professionals the pre-schooling period could be minimized.
- Smaller groups of children interacting with competent and qualified staff in enriched environments show much better outcomes. Poor quality care in large groups can often produce negative results.
- There is a need for stability and continuity environment particularly for young children.

A very innovative path was followed in the 80s and 90s in developed countries which can be replicated in Pakistan as well. Child care training programs were expanded for child care staff who could be trained more quickly and cheaply compared to the universities and who would also be less expensive to employ after training. This sector first provides a Child Care Certificate which can be followed up with an Associate Diploma in Child Care.

Quality staff is pivotal to quality outcomes. In this connection the professional development, compensations and working conditions for early childhood service can create wonders. As a result there would be a high motivation and dedication amongst staff which would turn into a positive impact on the overall program quality.

(Ain, G, 2005) recommends ongoing professional development as also good initial preparation and greater consistency across initial professional preparation programs. She emphasized the need for greater government and private funding for initial training as well as revised compensation structures for trained care givers. The higher costs for trained professional may reduce the number of those who are operating their institutions for profits alone and this would call for higher government support for the programs.

Greenwood, G. (1999) quotes many studies that bring out the harm caused by the separation of care and education. He refers to a study by Sebastian that as early as 1980 predicted that this separation would result in a two tier system at loggerheads with each other. This division according to Allison has been cemented and enshrined in funding, regulations and licensing. The distribution

of resources among the two has been unequal. Qualifications, pay and working conditions have become sector specific. While more resources are going to the child care sector the staff in this sector is much less qualified and low paid. Private sector driven by the demand and motivated by opportunities to make high profits had invested in child care without insisting on staff qualifications and without giving adequate compensations. Private sector institutions where qualified staff was employed and standards were maintained were so expensive that only the elite could send their children to such institutions. Allison argues that the division had resulted in creating a 'strong economic base rather than a developmental base for early childhood policies'.

Recommendations

In the light of all findings it is proposed that:

- The thoughtful planning for the promotion of ECE should be taken up
- Policy makers in Pakistan should take guidance from this to strengthen the ECE program
- A cohesive approach for developing an 'integrated service model'.
- Agreement on development and learning outcomes within a national curriculum framework.
- Development of an associated system of national credentialing of early childhood staff.
- Strengthening the quality assurance system.
- To ensure the provision of more equitable access, experience and outcome for all children.
- Establishing effective assessment mechanism
- Focus on holistic development
- Provision and development of well-designed learning resources

Study further recommends establishment of standards to improve the existing condition of ECE by focusing on professional development of teachers and involving community specially parents. This study will assist policy makers in developing standards for ECE in Pakistan and also to address the short comings of existing system in order to bring about an effective and meaningful change.

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