

Rethinking ECE in Pakistan

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) became a hot topic in Pakistan when it was focused by the world as an important Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Until the year 2000, ECE in Pakistan was sporadic, and mainly catered by the private sector or Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Pakistan being a signatory to the Education for All (EFA) declaration, made by 189 countries of the world in Senegal in April 2000, is committed to ensure ECE by the year 2015. A national ECE curriculum was therefore formulated in the year, 2002 and revised in 2007. However, the anticipated benchmarks for the ultimate goal of 100% enrollment and Universal Primary Education (UPE) were consistently thwarted. The purpose of this research is to highlight probable causes of under achieving ECE targets, and to rethink ECE through a SWOT¹ analysis. The data for research will be extracted from extensive documentation available on ECE in Pakistan.

Introduction

Ever since its independence from the subcontinent in August 1945, the government of Pakistan is consistently stressing its resolve to achieve 100% enrollment of school age children at the Primary and Secondary school levels. Government statistics show that there are 19 million children of age band 5-9 years in

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Pakistan, out of which 6 million are not enrolled in any school. In addition, 45% of the enrolled school children drop out without completing the primary cycle, whereas another 30% drop out at the middle school level (National Education Policy Review January, 2006, pg. 6).

The socioeconomic conditions of the poor are degenerating consistently. Beggary is the most prevalent social evil, being the biggest indicator of public sector failure in Pakistan. This single factor rudely reflects the ineffectiveness of Government's service delivery in all major public sector domains namely; Education, Health, Social Welfare and Policing.

The masses living in rural areas consider schooling as an opportunity cost for their children working in the fields or even begging, which ensures at least one day's food for them. The only incentive for sending their children to schools, for majority of poor families, is the hope of children being able to learn some income-generating skills. Learning to read and write is meaningless for such families unless it is associated with earning a decent living.

For the general public living in villages and towns of Pakistan education is a luxury that can only be indulged in by the more privileged section of the society. According to UNICEF, the percentage of out-of-school children aged 5-9 years in Pakistan is as high as 30%. This percentage is doubled for children aged 10-19 years, 60% of whom have never been inside a classroom. The dropout rate is alarmingly high as only half of the enrolled children reach grade five.

A report published by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in the year 2004 lays stress on need-based, culturally sound Primary education in order to build shared values and promote the desire for self improvement. According to the report, it is imperative to invest heavily in the poorest population groups in order to increase their productivity. This can only be ensured through public education programmes focusing life skills and community living.

Investment in need-based, culturally appropriate primary schooling offers a low risk strategy for tackling the problem of widespread poverty. In this context, it will be most appropriate to critically analyze all educational programs contributing towards basic/ primary education or literacy in Pakistan. ECE needs to be perceived not as an end in itself but as a necessary precursor to compulsory primary education, culminating in at least the basic pre-requisite for vocational/ technical/ agro-based education or training.

Review of documentation

Nationwide survey reports on the state of primary education highlight some alarming facts associated with public schools of Pakistan. A considerable number of primary schools across the country (almost 17%) are operational without any school buildings (SDPI, 2003). There is a general lack of basic necessities like blackboard, chalk, charts, mats and even very basic furniture. A large number of schools have no provision for safe and healthy drinking water and pose a security threat on account of having no boundary walls. The funds provided for Public schools are often bound by strict specifications regarding their disbursement which in many cases fail to coincide with the most pressing needs of individual schools (HRCP, pg. 22). Thus the already meager budget available for school improvement and maintenance is further reduced because of unwise expenditure patterns.

According to Malik (2007), the devolution program in Pakistan was initiated to achieve closer interaction between public authorities and the electorate, in the hope of increasing accountability and formulating public policies in accordance with local needs. However, the decentralized system of governance did not prove to be as effective as anticipated because of inadequate funding and low capacity of local bodies for decision-making, accountability and implementation. The local Nazims were mere figureheads as regards decision making about local teachers' salaries and transfers, which were still taken up at the provincial level.

The persistent inability of public schools to retain children for the complete primary cycle at the national level manifested itself in a 14% increase of dropout rate between 1996 and 2000 (SDPI, 2004). Factors responsible for the upward trend in dropout rate can be categorized as **Economic factors**, reflected in poor school conditions such as shelter less, overcrowded classrooms; **Geographical factors** including remotely located and difficult to access schools without adequate communication systems; **Administrative factors** mirrored by weak school management and a disconnect between cultural norms and school curriculum; **Legislative factors**, showing a lack of implementation or absence of clear laws regarding the rights and responsibilities of the citizens of Pakistan.

Factors causing low school enrollment include the long distances students have to cover for reaching schools in certain parts of the country; lack of motivational learning materials; non-conducive learning environment and irrelevant school curriculum; absence of properly trained, conscientious teachers; poverty and meager household incomes; lack of connection between education and social wellbeing and a general perception that begging in streets and child labour provide more material benefits to underprivileged families than primary education. The above-mentioned

causes of low enrollment and high drop-out rate delineated by HRCP are also corroborated by the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2000-2001.

Gazdar (1999) highlights the perceived ineffectiveness of the public school system by observing that in urban settings where a variety of school choice is available for the citizens, even poor households opt for relatively more expensive private schools for their children rather than the free or subsidized government schools.

Thus, all relevant documentation points towards the sub-optimal conditions of public schools and education across Pakistan. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the national curriculum for Early Childhood Education, which is based on the internationally acclaimed High Scope curriculum, has failed to synchronize with the ground realities.

Documentation Analysis

The review of extensive documentation on childhood education brings forth several facts. The foremost being that despite the claims of concerted efforts made by governments, NGOs and international developmental agencies, the anticipated impact in this field has failed to occur. Ever since the first Pakistan National Education Conference held in 1947, governments have consistently recognized the need for ECE and its role in promoting literacy by reducing the school dropout rate at the primary level. But the undisputed national goal of Universal Primary Education, reiterated by each subsequent government since 1947, seems nowhere in sight even now in 2012. At the same time, the national aim of poverty reduction through educational initiatives has been rudely thwarted, as statistics show that Pakistan's dependency on foreign aid in the social sector is on the rise since the year 2001 (Malik, pg 6)

The education system and social structure of Pakistan is in a dire state at the close of the first decade of the new millennium. The ambitious plans set forth for UPE by the year 2015 are falling far short of the set targets yet again. Early Childhood Education, which was formally introduced in schools at the turn of the century, with the hope of achieving higher enrollment trends and reduced drop-out rates in public schools, has met with the same fate as other educational initiatives that have fizzled out in the past. This calls for serious rethinking of the whole concept of ECE.

Two main factors responsible for the ineffectiveness of ECE in Pakistan are school governance or administration, and the universal nature of the ECE curriculum. Keeping in view the weaknesses of our public service delivery system, a more

customized approach to ECE is required to bring about the desired societal change. As a starting point, it is imperative that pedagogical continuity be maintained between early childhood educational programs and compulsory primary schooling so that the acquisition of basic education is a joyful and exciting experience for all children.

A complex web of cultural, religious, and political influences has an enormous impact with respect to education and curriculum development in Pakistan. Education can be a powerful unifying force in the building of a “united nation” where tolerance, respect, and relationships are fostered, provided it is cognizant of indigenous ground realities. As a general practice in Pakistan, curricular challenges within the country are usually met with Westernized solutions based on international educational models.

Depending on school starting age, the concept of early childhood education varies from country to country and from culture to culture. Thus, trying to implement a borrowed model being practiced in a developmentally advanced State or indeed, in an economically privileged class of society, may be totally out of context for the public schools of Pakistan. If ECE is to contribute to lifelong literacy, then it must be integrated into the first six years of primary education rather than being treated as a one-year, stand-alone curriculum policy.

The research finding, that the fastest rate of growth of the human mind takes place between a child’s age of 3 to 6 year, does not mean that children of this age need to be crammed with new knowledge. It simply means that this is a very receptive age band during which children form values, attitudes and learn to attach meanings to actions and behaviors. In other words, education at this time is about transfer of culture and values as well as building up of self esteem and self confidence among children. It is equally important to ensure that what children learn in schools continue to hold value and meaning for them throughout their adult life as well. This requires educational initiatives that foster pride and ownership of indigenous life and culture together with building up a value structure that enriches the local culture.

The currently implemented ECE national curriculum claims that:

“Intervening in the earliest years helps to reduce the social and economic disparities and race and gender inequalities that divide our society. It is through initiatives such as this, that we can begin to put an end to inter-generational cycles of poverty, disease, violence and discrimination.”

However, these claims seem meaningless when the ECE curriculum is interpreted as a one-year, joyful learning experience in an environment that is largely make-believe for the vast majority of children coming from under-privileged families.

After the culmination of this one-year, fairy tale experience these children are returned to the harsh realities of the public school system and the rampant unfair and sometimes brutal social structure surrounding them.

The National ECE Curriculum 2007 states its general aims as, “Provide for the holistic development of the child, which includes physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral development.

- Develop critical thinking skills.
- Nurture tolerance and respect for diversity.
- Nurture in children, a sense of identity and pride in being Pakistani.
- Provide knowledge and understanding of Islam and Islamic society.
- Develop an understanding and respect for the beliefs and practices of all other religions.
- Create in children, a sense of citizenship in community, country and the world.
- Foster a sense of independence, self-reliance and a positive self-image.
- Equip the child with life-long learning skills.
- Provide opportunities for active learning.
- Provide opportunities for self-initiated play and decision making”.

For a one-year, unique and child-friendly ECE program, catering for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years, these educational objectives seem over-blown and unrealistic. Furthermore, this program is doomed to culminate in a dilapidated Primary education system². The ECE curriculum of one year needs to be built upon and extended to include the entire span of primary education, if the stated objectives are to be achieved.

Pakistan claims to be an Islamic state and Islam places great stress on the role of parents, especially that of the mothers, in the upbringing of children. It is therefore imperative to link up ECE with adult literacy programs and a viable social welfare system that supports and facilitates healthy and knowledgeable parenthood up till the children have attained 4 years of age. From this age onwards, the state should take full responsibility of educating its children at least until they achieve the basic literacy level, which is quoted as six years of primary education.

² Described as, “Weak planning and unrealistic objectives; inadequately projected resource requirements; unclear monitoring paths and indicators; too little attention to quality – less than 1 per cent resource allocation on non-salaried inputs like books; implementation plans misled by political objectives especially in the location choices for schools; recruitment bans and high absenteeism – schools in rural areas lie idle as teachers transfer themselves to urban areas; overly bureaucratic and duplicative administrative structures; lack of community and parental involvement.” (Malik, pg.19)

Proposed Paradigm Shift in ECE

If we continue to look at education as a product to be delivered to the international community in response to our commitment to the EFA goal, it is unlikely that education will be able to fulfill its true purpose of bringing a positive societal change. The output of plans and policies will only be a soul-less projection of estimations as portrayed in the following table, which treats education as a commodity and is one of many estimates of financial resource gaps documented by government sources. It draws attention to the main focus of the government, which is to quantitatively increase school enrollment and simultaneously lament the lack of available funds for doing so:

Table: 01 - Resource gap affecting the achievement of EFA targets for primary education, adult literacy and early childhood education

Net Enrollment in Primary education by 2015	17.536 million
Cost of primary education provision for public sector (Rs. Million)	
Maintaining present participation rates	582,300
Financing additional students	373,271
Total Cost of Primary education provision for the public sector	955,571
Cost of achieving 50 per cent participation rates for early childhood education	48,329
Total Cost of achieving EFA Objectives by 2015/16	1,212,097
Budget Resources available in 2015/16 (Rs. Million)	786,005
Resource Gap (Rs. Million)	426,092

An Estimation of Required And Available Resources To Achieve EFA Goals. (Source: Government of Pakistan, 2003.)

The table above is one of many estimates of financial resource gaps documented by government sources. Government documentation on Primary education during the last sixty years or so, show the same pattern albeit the constant inflow of funding from international developmental agencies. Each subsequent national education policy proclaims an increase in the budget allocation for the education sector and each policy and Economic survey simultaneously admits its failure in achieving this goal. In short, it is very clear from the available documentation that advancement in the education sector of the country has mainly been of a circular nature, with very little headway towards the stated goals.

The only real increase over the period of years, as evidenced by the documentation, has been in donor funding and involvement in setting national educational goals. As, for example, between 1994 and 1998 the enrollment of girl students increased 247% in NWFP and 197% in Baluchistan due to the food incentive introduced in these provinces to encourage literacy among girls through the Social Action Program (Economic Survey, 1992-93). Each girl student's family was entitled to receive a five-litre tin of vegetable oil if she attended school for a minimum of 20 days per month (World Food Program and UNESCO, 1999). However, the Economic Survey 2000-2001 admitted the defeat of the SAP as there was a decline in enrollment in government schools from 1998-99. This clearly shows that increasing school enrollment through short term measures cannot be expected to produce the desired results in educating the masses.

Education in Pakistan needs to be perceived as a 'Tool', not as a 'Goal'. The ultimate goal to be achieved in the Pakistani context should be the attainment of a self-sustaining, self-respecting, enlightened and gainfully employed nation which lives up to its national ideology in word and deed. In this sense, the budget for 'Education' will in fact be the budget for the war against terrorism, oppression, social injustice, beggary, prostitution and a host of other evils prevalent within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

According to the new paradigm of ECE, the government's educational goals will not revolve around increasing enrollment, but would concentrate on methods and mechanisms through which the prescribed basic literacy curriculum is delivered to all and sundry at their doorsteps. Education will no longer be an option but a responsibility to be fulfilled in order to remain a citizen of Pakistan.

With this shift in paradigm, the whole concept of ECE and Primary education would need to change. Instead of aiming for UPE, the aim would now be USR or Universal Self Respect and national identity. The ECE curriculum would span the whole period of Primary education, focusing on building up a nation that has a clear understanding of its rights and responsibilities and is cognizant of the prudent use of its available resources. In other words, a nation that is determined to live within its means and does not sell its self respect for foreign funding and farcical well-being.

The first six years of primary schooling would focus on welcoming the child to the human community as a responsible citizen of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This in itself would be no mean task, and would logically require a highly skilled and competent teaching force, the best learning environment that the nation can offer and a seamless administrative system. The pedagogy for such an education would be based on the joyful learning concept in order to inculcate higher human values and

not to promote unhealthy competition among students, based on verbatim reproduction of as yet meaningless text to them.

The evaluation and assessment system would consequently be designed to focus on measuring the strengths of each student and testing his/her aptitude for placement in the Secondary school or a variety of other skill-based options such as, apprenticeship for small and medium entrepreneurial skills or entry into vocational or agro/ technical training centres as well as formally recognized religious seminaries or home-based skills.

Such a system of primary education cannot understandably function in isolation. At the policy level, it needs to be tackled in conjunction with the Social Welfare and Health departments with clear-cut terms of reference for each department.

In redefining ECE, therefore, the process must start from the aims and objectives of education and move on to more localized solutions. Once the national focus of education is agreed upon, the provincial diversity such as the medium of instruction can be adjusted as per requirement and availability of resources.

In order to combat the prevalent issues, the ECE policy will need to employ a multi-faceted approach inclusive of, but not limited to the following parts:

- Redefining ECE as synonymous with primary schooling and reformulating its educational objectives
- Making compulsory Primary education a domain of the Social Welfare department for administrative purposes and that of the Education department for its academic aspect. Thus making two government departments responsible for achieving the desired results
- Combating street beggary of children through appropriate legislation and social welfare programs linked with education
- Incorporating the joyful learning concept of ECE into the national primary school curriculum
- Including knowledge of ECE concepts into the National Professional Standards for accreditation of Elementary School teachers
- Aligning teacher education programs with the National Professional Standards.
- Recruiting new accredited Elementary school teachers in primary schools
- Making ample budget allocation for recruitment of new teachers, development and maintenance of infra structure, school buildings and specific student welfare programs

- Making service rules lucrative for Primary school teachers
- Tackling ECE, Social Welfare, Health and Adult Literacy as a cohesive policy matter
- Providing some provincial autonomy in the implementation of the nationally agreed upon ECE curriculum to incorporate the cultural diversity within Pakistan.
- Providing state of the art primary school buildings for every locality within Pakistan at top priority basis and ensuring their up-to-date maintenance mechanisms. This can be easily achieved by one or all of the following three options:
 - 1) Converting State buildings under VIP use to Primary schools
 - 2) Motivating wealthy land-owners to donate land or building for Primary schools
 - 3) Using Mosques as Primary schools and Adult literacy centres between prayer timings.

A SWOT analysis of ECE in Pakistan is presented here to facilitate understanding of the proposed shift in paradigm.

SWOT Analysis

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ECE National Curriculum is research-based, age-appropriate document. • The results of several national surveys indicate that it provides joyful learning experience for children when the curriculum document is followed appropriately. • Curricular objectives are achievable, provided there is ample space for activity-based learning; availability of ECE trained teachers assisted by a female helper; and an efficient school management and administrative system. <p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A paradigm shift from one-year, stand-alone ECE curriculum to a six-year, integrated ECE curriculum for basic 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ECE classroom does not exist in all Public schools across Pakistan due to lack of availability of both infrastructure and appropriately trained teachers. • Schools where ECE has been implemented in the prescribed manner are suffering from a sort of caste-system, with the colorful and vibrant ECE classroom being perceived as the “elite” class and causing resentment in others. • The ECE text book developed by Punjab Text Book Board is being heavily relied upon by teachers within this province thus promoting conventional pedagogy. <p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ECE initiative in Pakistan can be self-defeating if it is not strengthened and supported by legislation and efficient
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<p>education, focusing on good citizenship and building a self-sustaining nation can lead to poverty reduction and reduced donor-dependency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current ECE policy document has the potential to form the basis for a revised child-friendly public school policy of a six-year integrated ECE program, aiming for basic literacy and responsible citizenship. • The proposed paradigm shift in ECE can be synchronized with the MDGs for speedy implementation, leading to social sector reform by the year 2015. 	<p>administration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children having experienced the joyful learning methodology of the ECE classroom tend to develop a greater negativity towards the existing Public school system, thus threatening to further accelerate the drop-out rate. • Anything less than a revolutionary, time-bound and target-oriented public school policy threatens to result in a status-quo as witnessed during the 64 year history of primary education in Pakistan.
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The analysis draws attention towards the following main conclusions:

- ✓ Public schools in Pakistan require immediate revised engineering with a focus on nation-building and self-reliance, rather than just “promoting literacy”.
- ✓ The ECE curriculum as a stand-alone document is self-defeating unless it is interwoven with basic or primary education.
- ✓ The current external and internal forces impinging upon Pakistan as a nation make it imperative to re-engineer primary or basic education being provided by the public sector.
- ✓ Human resource has to be treated as the greatest potential strength in building a self-respecting, autonomous Pakistan.
- ✓ A shift in educational aims from “education for literacy” to “education for self-reliance and well-being” is required to make education meaningful for the general public.

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