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## Improving Practices in Early Childhood Classrooms in Pakistan: issues and challenges from the field

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on an early childhood programme that has been initiated by the Institute for Educational Development at the Aga Khan University in Karachi, Pakistan. The programme is a Certificate in Education and involves training teachers so as to enable them to understand early childhood education and development, and to become effective practitioners in their classrooms. The early childhood education and development programme is a field-based programme of six months' duration, where the emphasis is on supporting and mentoring course participants as they implement the High/Scope approach in their classrooms and engage children in active learning. The article outlines the structure and content of the programme and also highlights the processes engaged in when improving practices in the classroom with regard to setting up the classroom environment, establishing routines, and integrating the curriculum. In the course of working with teachers as they made a shift from formal classroom settings with an emphasis on teacher-directed teaching to settings that were more child-oriented with an active encouragement of learning, various issues and challenges emerged. These issues and challenges are discussed in this article. Subsequently, some recommendations are made for improving the status of early childhood education and development in Pakistan.

Early childhood education (ECE) is not a new concept in Pakistan. The National Plan of Action (Ministry of Education, 2003) recognized that: 'Early Childhood Education had been well organized and formalized in the nineteen seventies'. *Katchi* ('pre-primary classes') were organized in the formal primary schools. However, this practice was officially almost discontinued during the

1980s (National Plan of Action: Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 60). Even though early childhood and *katchi* classes existed, they were in dire straits – especially in the public sector. Children were taught in a traditional way with the teacher standing at a blackboard directing the children. Rote memorization was encouraged. Overall, young children had a poor start in education, which was a concern for most people. In the private sector there were early childhood provisions, which mainly used Montessori approaches catering only to the needs of the elite and the upper-middle class of the society.

The quality of ECE still remains an issue in Pakistan due to many factors, such as the lack of trained teachers, limited resources, and a lack of awareness about the importance of the educational experience. Early childhood is not given much importance in education and very often it is given the least priority in terms of funding. It is no wonder, therefore, that the least qualified or least experienced teachers are assigned to teach young children.

With early childhood now being given importance globally, Pakistan's National Plan of Action identifies ECE as a priority area. It has been designated as such in order to improve primary access and retention of young children, and provide them with opportunities for future success.

With this renewed commitment to formalize early childhood classes and with the introduction of the new ECE curriculum, which has been authored by the Teachers' Resource Center (TRC), a non-governmental organization, the process of setting up early childhood or *katchi* classes is now being hastened. As such, several ECE programmes are being implemented both in the public and private sector.[1] The early childhood education and development (ECED) programme at the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development [2] is one such initiative. This initiative aims to enable early childhood or *katchi* teachers to understand early childhood education and development, and helps to support them in becoming effective practitioners. The first step towards achieving this aim was the introduction of a field-based, certificate-level course in early childhood education and development for teachers of early childhood classes.

The first ECED certificate programme was completed in December 2003. This was a field-based programme of six months' duration and the first of its kind. There are hardly any programmes to train early childhood teachers in existence. The programme was built on the High/ Scope approach, which was developed in the USA in the 1960s. This was in line with the Government of Pakistan's ECE curriculum, which also draws on the same approach.

The programme was structured in three phases, which are shown in Figure 1. Components were built into the first phase of the programme to help course participants understand how children learn and develop. The content of key learning areas such as language and literacy, mathematics, social studies, science and the environment, creative arts, physical education, and nutrition and health was also studied in order to enable course participants to deliver the ECE curriculum. Health, nutrition, and care were given special attention since these are the most neglected areas in schools in Pakistan. Conscious efforts

were made to integrate topics within the key learning areas instead of teaching topics separately. The assessment of young children was also an essential part of the programme along with a component on parenting to enable the participants to develop strategies for effectively working with parents. Course participants were provided with ample time to prepare low-cost teaching and learning materials to take back to their own classrooms. Throughout this phase emphasis was placed on the integration of content and methodology, and attempts were made to draw out theory from teachers' own practice and develop content through using activity-based approaches as a model. Emphasis was placed on 'active learning', which allows children to explore their environment, and experiment and engage with materials in order to construct their own knowledge. It also allows children the opportunity to make choices and, at the same time, promotes decision making in children. Furthermore, it allows them to plan for their own learning and actively participate in the classroom, taking responsibility for their actions.

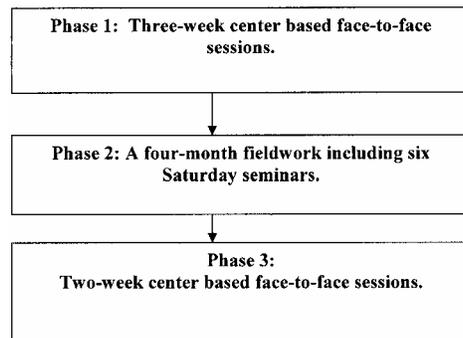


Figure 1. Structure of the ECED Programme.

The second phase of the programme was the field component, where course participants were supported and mentored in their own classes by a team of early childhood education and development professionals. The trainers themselves had initially undergone very rigorous field-based training for a year and a half, so they could understand the problems encountered in the field. The 21 course participants [3] were supported by 5 trainers in implementing their learning from the first phase. They were encouraged to engage children in active learning through setting up environments in the classroom that were conducive to learning. They worked consciously to facilitate and extend children's learning in all areas of the curriculum by establishing routines, developing materials, improving their interaction with the children, and integrating the curriculum.

The third phase of the programme was again based at the Institute and dealt with consolidating course participants' learning and further built on the four months of fieldwork.

Working with teachers to implement active learning in the classroom was, no doubt, a daunting job. The first task before the teachers was to set up *goshas* ('learning areas') in the classrooms, as is mentioned in Pakistan's ECE curriculum. The main learning areas included a language area, a mathematics area, a creative arts area, a home and domestic play area, and a construction area. Since provisions or materials were not easily available, teachers made their own resources using low-cost materials. These resources included paper dolls, flashcards, story props, puppets, masks, etc. Course participants were also encouraged to collect natural materials such as stones, sticks, seeds, etc. Material collection strategies were also undertaken. In some cases parents and the community provided materials, and in other cases the school management allocated some funds for the purchase of materials.

The next task was to establish routines in the classroom. Half-hour sessions were the routine prevalent in the organization of most schools. These sessions were replaced with routines such as greeting time, speaking and listening time, large circle time, small group time (which was generally utilized for teaching skills), and plan-do-review time (which included a 45- to 60-minute period of work time). This 'work time' occupied a central part in the routine, as it provided children with the time, space, and freedom to explore and experiment with materials. At the same time it gave children the opportunity to take charge of their own learning.

In order to introduce course participants to continuous assessment, they were encouraged to observe children and record their progress as opposed to assessing children only at the end of the school year. The teachers also carried out two in-depth case studies of children as a way of charting their progress. This gave them an insight into children's understanding and their emotional and social development.

An effort was also made to involve parents, so that the teachers and parents worked in partnership to enhance children's learning not only in school, but also at home. In order to achieve this purpose, parents' meetings were held and they were invited into the classroom where they were made aware of the change in teaching approaches and were invited to experience active learning first-hand.

As a result of the rigorous fieldwork, course participants emerged much stronger both personally and professionally. They were ready to take the initiative and as one course participant commented: 'We have learned how to take initiative by ourselves rather than waiting for things to get done for us.' Another course participant stated: 'This programme is not only useful for children. It has also affected our own lives. It has made us more creative.'

Whilst working with teachers as they made a shift from formal classroom settings with an emphasis on teacher-directed teaching to settings that were more child-oriented with an active encouragement of learning, various issues and challenges emerged. These issues and challenges will now be outlined.

The foremost issue was the great disparity in teacher-student ratios, mainly in schools from the public sector. This was, however, also true of some

schools in the private sector. Some schools had a single teacher teaching only a few students, but the majority of schools had one teacher teaching more than 60 students. With no policy on teacher–student ratios, large classes continue to pose a challenge. The tutors tried to convince the school management to provide another teacher in such circumstances but this was not achieved in all cases due to financial constraints.

Financial constraints were encountered as schools rarely allocate separate budgets for early childhood classes. In order to equip classes with teaching and learning materials and other resources, money was required – money that was not always easily available. Low-cost materials addressed this problem to an extent, but even low-cost materials cost something. The trainers in this particular programme managed to convince the school management of the importance of investing at least minimal funds.

Most teachers who have graduate-level qualifications are assigned to teach at secondary level or in institutes of higher education. Due to this problem it is very difficult to find qualified early childhood teachers. It was therefore also very difficult to select participants for this particular programme as most of the early childhood teachers did not meet the criterion of being graduate teachers.

The language used for teaching was another challenge that was encountered during this programme. The course participants came with a range of linguistic capabilities. The programme was conducted mainly in English and some course participants were found to be extremely fluent in English whereas others were at the other end of the spectrum. It was for this reason that the trainers used a bilingual approach.

Some of the recommendations that will need to be considered if early childhood education and development is to be given high priority in Pakistan are as follows:

- There is a need to raise awareness among key stakeholders regarding the importance of early childhood education and development.
- Parents need to be involved in a much more unified manner if a partnership between the school and home is to exist. This will ensure that optimal results are achieved in enhancing children’s potential to the utmost.
- One cannot refute the importance of resources and learning materials in an early childhood classroom and these require money. It is therefore recommended that separate allocations be made in budgets for the area of early childhood education.
- There is a need for support structures for teachers of young children. Often these teachers are not valued enough and consequently their confidence and self-esteem are very low. Mechanisms need to be devised so as to uplift teachers of *katchi* and early childhood classes.
- There is an urgent need for research in this area, especially in Pakistan. Literature available on early childhood education is mostly from the more developed countries. Research needs to be undertaken on the various facets of curriculum and development in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

Even though it is just the beginning of ensuring better practices, the certificate programme has been instrumental in improving practices in early childhood education. The work with teachers in this programme has been on an incremental basis, with the involvement of staff, parents, and school management from the beginning. A major constraint that will need to be addressed is that of finance, especially if practices such as these are to be sustained in the future.

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### **Notes**

- [1] Two examples are worth mentioning here. Firstly, the Teachers' Resource Center is a non-governmental organization that has worked extensively in implementing ECE programmes in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. Secondly, 'Releasing Confidence and Creativity: building sound foundations for early learning' is an ECE initiative funded by USAID and coordinated by the Aga Khan Foundation. This programme is being implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation and six partner organizations in the provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan, Pakistan. Besides these there are programmes being implemented by Unicef, Plan International, and Save the Children (UK), to name a few.
- [2] The Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) is a private university in Karachi, Pakistan, whose focus is on teacher education.
- [3] The 21 course participants were selected from 15 schools in Karachi and the northern areas of Pakistan. They represented the public sector, private sector, and community schools, and were from both well-resourced and under-resourced schools.

### **Reference**

Ministry of Education (2003) *Nation Plan of Action on Education for All (2001-2015) Pakistan*. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan.