

Need and Provision of Early Childhood Education (ECCE) in the National Educational Policies of Pakistan

Sara Siddique*
Wajeeha Aurangzeb**

Abstract

This article analyzed the need and provision of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017) and other related documents to explore the factors that led to the introduction of ECCE in mainstream education in Pakistan. The document analysis of the national educational policies and other related reports indicate that for almost four decades, ECCE was narrowly addressed in the educational policies of Pakistan mainly because of the lack of prioritization. It also suggested that the significance of ECCE was acknowledged in the National Education Policy of 2009 for the first time and strengthened in the National Education Policy of 2017, due to several international commitments of Pakistan including the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All 2000, The Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) and its Vision 2030. The National Educational Policy of 2009, 2017 and the Development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Curriculum are a few positive steps for the implementation of ECCE in Pakistan. Still, there is a need to monitor and evaluate the existing state and make a practical plan for positive reforms.

* PhD Scholar, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.
Email: sarisiddiq@gmail.com

** Associate Professor Department of Educational Sciences National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. Email: waurangzeb@numl.edu.pk

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Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has been recognized as an integral part of education by several educational experts as it focuses on the skills development of young children that prepare them for future learning activities. Many studies have suggested that the learning process of a child starts right from birth and continues till the end of his life (M. A. Khan, 2018; Nawaz et al., 2021; Shams et al., 2023). This process especially the early six to seven years of his life is pivotal in the overall personality growth of a child, hence, more attention is required in these early years so a child can learn better in future (Tahira et al., 2021). It can be said that the early years of a child may determine the kind of adult he will grow up into.

According to UNESCO, early childhood education encompasses learning activities intended to support children's cognitive abilities, physical faculties, social development, and emotional intelligence through a holistic approach. It familiarizes young children with planned instruction outside of the family context, helping them acquire skills and abilities necessary for academic readiness and preparing them for entry into primary education. It includes preschool levels such as kindergarten, nursery, Montessori, and primary level from the age of 2 to 5 years. It encompasses all the activities and programs considered appropriate for a child of this age including pre-reading prewriting sensorial, and balance activities which could prepare him mentally and physically for future learning (Tahira et al., 2021).

After gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan experienced a shift in its priorities, concentrating more on various challenges in addition to education. The country aimed to prioritize education to establish a strong foundation; however, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) received limited attention during that period. Given the pressing need to build a new nation, policymakers were more focused on establishing administrative structures of education, diverting most resources to primary and secondary education. Consequently, the lack of emphasis on ECCE possibly hindered the formation of a solid educational foundation for young children which created a significant gap in the policies that remained persistent in all other educational policies for the years to come (N. Khan et al., 2017). Although in the global context, the significance of ECCE was recognized much earlier, its integration into policy and

planning remained limited in Pakistan until recent years. Pakistan started working on its first ECCE curriculum in 2002 and this curriculum could not be implemented until 2020 with major revisions (Nawaz et al., 2021).

This study aimed to explore the need and provision of ECCE in the national educational policies in Pakistan and the factors that have led to its implementation in recent years. With the help of the policy documents and a review of the related studies, insight is provided into how early childhood education gradually developed as an essential part of mainstream education in Pakistan.

Review of Literature

Concept and Significance of Early Childhood Education

The success of child in primary school greatly relies on the foundation established during the preschool years (Government of Pakistan, 2002). Extensive research has revealed that a staggering 80% of the brain develops during the crucial initial years, spanning from birth to 8 years old (Moss, 2018). The type of attention that children receive from their parents, preschool teachers, and caregivers significantly influences their learning abilities and social interactions, not only during their school years but throughout their lives (Dahlberg et al., 1999). During these formative years, children develop all the vital components of emotional intelligence, cognitive abilities, confidence, curiosity, determination, self-discipline, social skills, the ability to communicate effectively, and cooperation.(Nawaz et al., 2021). Many studies have concluded that support for early childhood development yields beneficial outcomes for a child over time. Hence, the intervention at this age may lead to better learning at a later phase in the life of a child (Blackwell et al., 2014; Hyun & Tyler, 2000; Moss, 2018; Samuelsson et al., 2019).

Education Levels in Pakistan

The schooling system in Pakistan has historically focused more on elementary and higher education, with early childhood care and education (ECCE) not being integrated as a mainstream component. The levels of education in Pakistan before the reforms of 2017 were as in the given table (Siddiqui, 2017; Suhag & Khan, 2020):

Table 1*The levels of Education in Pakistan*

| S No | Level | Grade/ Class | Year of Duration | Age Group |
|------|------------------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Primary Education | I-V | 5 | 5-10 |
| 2 | Elementary/ Middle Education | VI-VIII | 3 | 11-13 |
| 3 | Secondary Education | IX-X | 2 | 14-15 |
| 4 | Higher Secondary Education | XI-XII | 2 | 16-17 |
| 5 | College Education | XIII-XIV | 2 | 17-18 |
| 6 | University Education | XIII-XVI | 4 | 18-22 |

National Qualification Framework 2015 of Pakistan further elaborated on the educational levels in Pakistan. This framework intended to enhance the standard of education in Pakistan by bringing it to par with the international system (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2015). It replaced the older education level system by defining the levels clearly in the following manner:

Table 2*Levels of Education in Pakistan suggested by The National Qualification Framework P. 7*

| Educational Level | | | Award Type | Award Example | Duration |
|--|---|--|------------|---|---------------|
| Basic/ Elementary Education Level | 1 | Pre-Primary | | | 1-2 years |
| | | Primary | | | 1-5 years |
| | 2 | Middle | | | 3 years |
| Secondary Education Level | 3 | Secondary School Certificate (SSC) | | Matriculation | 2 years |
| Higher Secondary Education Level | 4 | Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) | | FA, FSc, ICS, I. Com, DBA, D. Com etc. | 2 years |
| Higher Education Level | 5 | Associate Degree Ordinary Bachelor | | BA/ BSc (Pass), B. Tech (Pass) Associate Degree etc. | 4-6 Semesters |

| | | | |
|---|----------------|--|--|
| 6 | Bachelor (Hon) | BA/BS, B.E, B. Arch, BSc. (Eng), BSc. (Agri), B. Tech (Hon) MA, MSc (16 years), LLB, B.Com (Hon), MBBS, DVM, BDS, Pharma D | 8-10 Semesters |
| 7 | Masters | MA/ MPhil/ MS/ MBA/ MSc. (Eng), M.E. M. Tech | Minimum 30 credit hours with or without thesis |
| 8 | Doctoral | PhD | 18 credit hours of coursework and dissertation |

This framework also listed ECCE as the level 1 of education in Pakistan comprising at least two years of education.

Policy Framework of ECCE in Pakistan

The framework for policy-making is a central factor in defining the outcome of education. The national educational policies developed after the independence of Pakistan until the 1970s mainly concentrated on making a proper education system (M. A. Khan, 2018). However, early childhood education did not receive substantial attention and specialized approaches within these policies. The table below outlines a brief history of policy provisions relating to ECCE (Shams et al., 2023).

Table 3

A Brief History of Policy Provisions Related to ECCE

| Time frame | Name of the Policy/ Document | Progression related to ECCE |
|------------|--|--|
| 1947 | The Education Conference 1947 | No recommendation on pre-primary(Shams et al., 2023). |
| 1959 | Commission on National Education 1959 | No recommendation was made for Early Childhood Education, or pre-primary education (N. Khan et al., 2017). |
| 1969 | Proposal for a New Educational Policy 1969 | No significant recommendation was made for early childhood education. This |

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| 1970 | The New Educational Policy 1970 | continued for almost four decades (N. Khan et al., 2017; Shams et al., 2023). |
| 1972 | Education Policy 1972- 1980 | |
| 1979 | The National Educational Policy, 1979 | |
| 1992 | The National Education Policy, 1992 | No detail of ECCE in the national education policy of 1992 except the introduction of ‘Kachi’ class in mentioned in one line in the national educational policy of 1998 (N. N. Saif & Naz, 2016). |
| 1998 | The National Education Policy, 1998 | |
| 2001 | National Plan of Action for EFA (2001-2015) | It proposed a detailed strategy to integrate ECCE into the formal education system. (Shabbir et al., 2021). |
| 2002 | National ECCE Curriculum, 2002 | The curriculum has been created to offer comprehensive policy and curricular recommendations for early childhood education in Pakistan (M. A. Khan, 2018; N. Khan et al., 2017; Shams et al., 2023; Swati et al., 2023). |
| 2009 | The National Education Policy, 2009 | The National Education Policy proposes the integration of early childhood care and education (ECCE) into mainstream education in all primary schools (Arshad & Zamir, 2018; Shams et al., 2023). |
| 2010 | 18 th Constitutional Amendment, 2010 | The 18th Constitutional Amendment shifted the power of planning education policies to the provinces that allocated budgets for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in their educational institutions through their education sector plans. At the federal level, ECCE classes were also introduced in government institutions (Nawaz et al., 2021; Swati et al., 2023). |
| 2017 | The National Education Policy 2017 | It devoted a whole section to ECCE in the policy documents and included several provisions to uplift the structure of ECCE in Pakistan. |
| 2018 | The National Education Policy Framework 2018 | The National Education Policy Framework 2018 listed ECCE as a fourth important plan in its third priority “Quality” leading national dialogue to instruct all the |

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| | | provinces for its development and implementation. (Government of Pakistan, 2018) |
| 2020 | Single National Curriculum 2020-2021 | In 2020, the curriculum for early childhood education was launched. |

State of ECCE in Pakistan

After the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All in 2000, the government of Pakistan formed the National Plan of Action for EFA (2001-2015) and proposed that ECCE be introduced in the formal schooling system of Pakistan. The procedure of designing the curriculum for ECCE started in 2002, and the same was revised in 2006 but the ECCE curriculum was not implemented (Shams et al., 2023). Although the Katchi class became a part of the main schooling system in public sector institutions after the NEP 2009, the work on the ECCE curriculum did not start till 2017 (Shams et al., 2023).

In this regard, The Education Sector Reforms Action Plan, 2001-2004 presented a practical plan to create the infrastructure for ECCE countrywide (Aga Khan Foundation, 2001). After this, the National Educational Policy of 2009 suggested five provisions for qualitative improvement of ECCE across the country (Swati et al., 2023). After the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, the power to make educational decisions was also shifted to provinces. This made education a provincial matter where the provinces had the autonomy to implement their curriculum. Due to this power shift, the provinces implemented their own policy actions (Nawaz et al., 2021).

The education sector reforms provided the vision and tools to fulfil the legal obligation of Article 25-A, which requires free and essential education for all children (Government of Pakistan, 2014). To meet the constitutional obligation, the provinces started the ECCE classes wherever they could, considering the feasibility due to inadequate infrastructure. However, additional finances and specific training for teachers were not provided. Although donor bodies provided financial assistance, but, the required resources for the implementation of policies could not be made available (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Pakistan signed to be a part of the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) and its Vision 2030. The subsection-4.2 of SDGs specifically ensures the provision of ECCE education to all boys and girls. Consequently, the National Educational Policy of 2017 prioritized the ECCE for the holistic development of children ranging from 4-5 years of age (Shah & Yusuf, 2021).

Although the significance of ECCE has been recognized in Pakistan and efforts are being made to improve its standards, there is still a long way to go before we can bring it to par with international standards. There is a need to study the policy provisions and consider the factors that hindered its implementation in Pakistan. This study is significant as it explores the state of ECCE in Pakistan, analyzes its policy provision and suggests ways for its implementation in true letter and spirit.

Conceptual Framework

The study used the research questions as the basic framework for the major themes. The sub-themes were developed after the analysis of the related policies and documents. The conceptual frame of the study is as under;

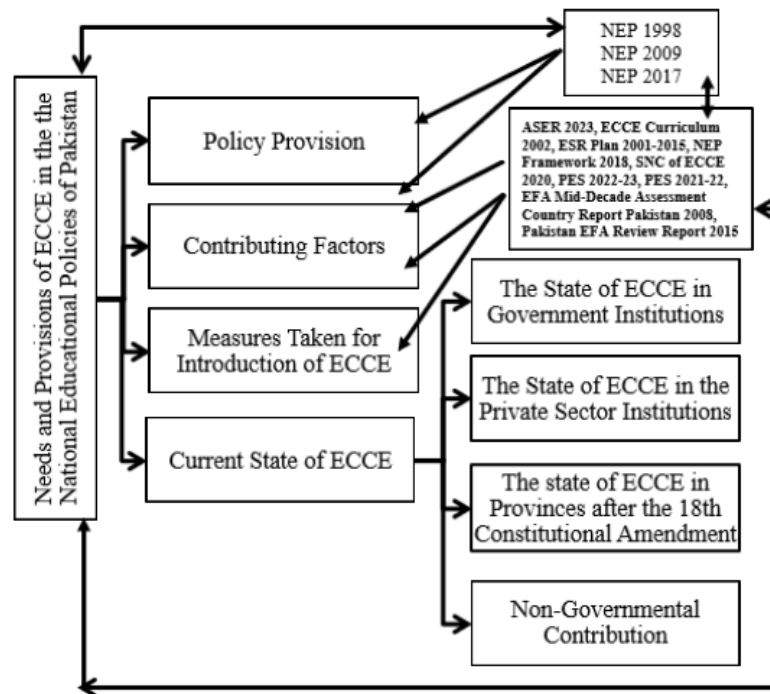


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework based on predetermined themes as listed in research questions

The main themes in the conceptual framework are policy provisions, contributing factors, measures taken for the introduction of

ECCE and the current state of ECCE. The state of ECCE in government institutions, the state of ECCE in private institutions, the state of ECCE in provinces after the 18th Constitutional Amendment and non-government contributions are the sub-themes generated after the desk review and document analysis of the mentioned reports and policies.

Objectives of the Study

The focus of this study was on attaining the following three objectives.

1. To examine the provision of early childhood education in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017) and other related documents (ASER National Report 2023, the curriculum of ECCE 2002, the Education Sector Reforms Plan 2001-2015, National Education Policy Framework 2018, Single National Curriculum of ECCE 2020, Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23, Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22, Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment Country Report Pakistan 2008, Pakistan Education for All Review Report 2015) of Pakistan.
2. To explore the factors that created a need for the formal introduction of ECCE in Pakistan through educational policies.
3. To analyze the current state of early childhood education in light of recent educational policies in Pakistan.

Research Questions of the Study

The study required to answer the subsequent research questions:

1. What provisions are made in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017) and other related document of Pakistan for early childhood care and education (ECCE)?
2. What factors contributed to the formal introduction of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Pakistan through Educational Policies and what measures were taken?
3. What is the current state of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in light of recent educational policies in Pakistan?

Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to the desk review of national educational policies of 1998, 2009 and 2017 only because the review of the literature

suggested that the national policies of 1959, 1972, and 1979 have no provisions of ECCE in them. The literature also suggested that the National Educational Policy of 1992 mentions several targets related to ECCE but the implementation of those targets did not come into effect. The same targets became part of the National Education Policy of 1998 and the practical work started after it, hence, it was also excluded. The other documents included in the analysis were limited to ASER National Report 2023, the curriculum of ECCE 2002, the Education Sector Reforms Plan 2001-2015, National Education Policy Framework 2018, Single National Curriculum of ECCE 2020, Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23, Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22, Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment Country Report Pakistan 2008, Pakistan Education for All Review Report 2015 as many studies have quoted their findings about the current state of ECCE in Pakistan.

Methodology

The study is designed using a qualitative research paradigm. It is based on a desk review of developed and published national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017), other related of Pakistan and the related literature concerning ECCE in Pakistan. Desk research refers to the secondary data collection using reports and documents instead of conducting fieldwork. It involves data collection from existing resources, making it a low-cost and convenient technique. The study relied on the published reports and policies collected through online journals, libraries and official websites. Subsequently, the document analysis was conducted of the obtained reports and policies for developing themes and provisions related to ECCE in Pakistan.

The listed research questions were used as the framework for finding the data related to predefined major themes. Against these major themes, the sub-themes were developed after conducting the analysis of documents.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted using a deductive approach to review Pakistan's national policies regarding the needs and provisions of ECCE. For this purpose, the following documents were analyzed against predefined themes aligned with the research questions: the published national educational policies from 1998, 2009, and 2017; ASER National Report 2023, the curriculum of ECCE 2002, the Education Sector Reforms

Plan 2001-2015, National Education Policy Framework 2018, Single National Curriculum of ECCE 2020, Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23, Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22, Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment Country Report Pakistan 2008, Pakistan Education for All Review Report 2015.

The document analysis has been frequently used in qualitative research as it has several benefits. There are six major steps for conducting document analysis (Morgan, 2022). The first step includes defining the research questions. The second step involves selecting the appropriate documents. The third step includes preparing and organizing the documents for analysis. The next step involves conducting the initial review and coding. Step five includes the analysis and interpretation of the documents drawing main themes. The last step includes presenting the findings. All these steps were followed to conduct this study. For the selection of the documents, factors like authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning were considered. The online resources were obtained from the official websites, libraries and journals. The analyzed documents generated the data on predefined themes as mentioned in the research questions. The authors reviewed the documents and consolidated the findings.

Findings of the Study

After a detailed analysis of the policy documents, reports and related literature, several themes have emerged against each research question. The themes are coded in several headings against each research question in the following manner:

Table 4

The Major Themes of the Study

| Research Question | Main Themes | Sub Themes |
|--|---------------------|--|
| Q.1 What provisions are made in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017) and other related document of Pakistan for early childhood care and education (ECCE)? | Policy Provision | ECCE Provisions in the National Education Policy of 1998 ECCE Provisions in the National Educational Policy, 2009 ECCE Provisions in the National Educational Policy, 2017 |
| Q. 2 What factors contributed to the formal introduction of early childhood | Factors Contributed | International Influence and Commitments |

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| education (ECCE) in Pakistan through Educational Policies and what measures were taken? | towards the Formal Introduction of ECCE in Pakistan Measures Taken for Introduction of ECCE as a Part of Main-stream Education | National Commitments Measures taken at the Government Level Role of External Bodies and NGOs |
| Q. 3 What is the current state of early childhood education (ECCE) in light of recent educational policies in Pakistan? | The current state of ECCE in Pakistan | The State of ECCE in Government Institutions The State of ECCE in the Private Sector Institutions The state of ECCE in Provinces after the 18th Constitutional Amendment <hr/> Non-Governmental Contributions |

Q.1 What provisions are made in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017) and other related document of Pakistan for early childhood care and education (ECCE)?

Policy Provision

Several educational initiatives and policies have been introduced to improve Pakistan's education system since 1947. No policies have been successfully implemented or accomplished due to various significant factors, including the political instability of the country (J. Saif et al., 2020). Even after four decades of Pakistan's creation, not a single educational policy mentioned anything officially about ECCE in the policy document (N. Khan et al., 2017 p.7). Although, the term "Kachi" was used in the 1970s as an informal presentation of children aged between 3-6 years, who accompanied their elder siblings to school but it was never a part of any policy document. Internationally, the significance of Early Childhood Education (ECCE) was realized much earlier, and the philosophies of Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, and Froebel were flourishing and promoting the nurturing environment of ECCE (J. Saif et al., 2020 p. 166). The related benefits were acknowledged, making it an integral part of mainstream education. However, Pakistan failed to adopt the same into its educational policies. The "Kachi" and "Paki" classes were integrated

into government schools through a five-year plan called "Awal-Adna, and Awal-Aala." (K. Khan et al., 2019) and it was formally superseded from the public education system in the 1980s.

ECCE Provisions in the National Education Policy, 1998

The "Kachi Class" was mentioned in the National Educational Policy of 1998 (policy provision para 5.3.5 p. 28) The policy talks about non-formal education in chapter 4 (p. 17- 23) where the policy talks about the establishment of non-formal education centres in primary schools but it fails to specify the age limit for it. Chapter five (p.27-28) of the policy talks about elementary education and discusses the policy provisions regarding primary education. Here it also talks about non-formal education on page 28 but no detail about the implementation of ECCE is given.

The Education Sector Reform Action Plan: 2001-02 to 2005-06 (p. 5) discusses the provision of ECCE after it became an integral part of the EFA for 2001-2015, as established in the goals agreed upon in Dakar. The EFA plan (p. 7) committed to institutionalizing ECCE in structured cycles. Consequently, the implementation of ECCE began in 2002 across various government institutions.

ECCE Provisions in the National Educational Policy, 2009

The policy of 2009 recognized the importance of ECCE and showed commitment to the provision of a minimum of one year of pre-primary education in all government schools. The term early childhood education (ECE) is used for ECCE in this policy. This included specialized training for teachers and a dedicated budget allocation. The policy also emphasized the provision of ECCE for children aged 3-5 years. The National Educational Policy of 2009 (p. 27-28) proposed the following actions (Government of Pakistan, 2009; N. Khan et al., 2017):

Action 1: ECCE will comprise the holistic development of the children and emphasize on provision of an interactive environment instead of a focus on traditional learning approaches. This will help in achieving the standard improvement in quality (Government of Pakistan, 2009 p. 27).

Action 2: The government will provide at least one year of pre-primary education to children aged 3 to 5 years. it will also strive to achieve access to ECCE in the next 10 years (Government of Pakistan, 2009 p.27).

Action 3: ECCE shall be provided in primary schools by allocating additional budget, teachers and further required assistance (Government of Pakistan, 2009 p.27).

Action 4: The aspiring ECCE teacher shall go through a mandatory two-year specific training in dealing with younger children (Government of Pakistan, 2009 p.27).

Action 5: The training of ECCE teachers will be based on the revised national curriculum of ECCE. This curriculum will also take several aspects into account including the cultural diversity of different regions (Government of Pakistan, 2009 p.28).

These actions were taken into consideration for the first time in Pakistan when ECCE was included as an integral component of the education sector and an additional budget was allocated to provinces for its implementation. It was also incorporated into the national plans for the education for all initiative.

ECCE Provisions in the National Educational Policy, 2017

The educational policy of 2017 dedicated a whole section to the provision of ECCE (Government of Pakistan, 2017). This chapter presents a detailed conceptual framework of ECCE, its significance, the situation analysis, challenges, targets and policy provisions. There are 22 policy provisions in the para 6.3 (p. 30-31) of the policy. A brief account of these provisions is given below:

Table 5

Policy Provisions Regarding ECCE in the National Educational Policy, 2017

| Area | Suggested Action |
|---|---|
| Access to ECCE | The children from age group 4 to 5 will be provided easy access to a minimum one year of pre-primary compulsory and free education. |
| Improvement in Infrastructure and Environment | The existing infrastructure will be upgraded with facilities, equipment, teaching material and kits, ICT-based A.V. aids, and services. |
| Provision of Staff | A minimum of one ECCE-trained teacher will be provided to over 25 students in addition to an ECCE assistant Teacher and an Ayya/ governess. |

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| Budget Allocation | Both Federal and Provincial Governments will ensure adequate budget allocation for developmental and recurring expenditures. |
| Professional Development of Teachers | Exclusive ECCE-based professional development programmes will be launched in universities and teacher training institutions. |
| Promotion of ECCE | Provision and dissemination of research opportunities on various aspects of ECCE will be ensured for its promotion. |
| Curriculum Development and Change | The existing curricula will be reviewed, updated and implemented considering various aspects including the aspect of holistic development of children, Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), and activity-based learning and discouraging the use of Textbooks. |
| Coordination and outreach | Coordination among various stakeholders, public sector, private sector, ministries and departments will be ensured through a joint ECCE plan for the establishment of ECCE centres, and expansion of facilities to underprivileged children. |

There is a gradual improvement observed in policy provision of ECCE in the national education policies of 1998, 2009 and 2017. Table 6 provides a brief comparative analysis of the provisions in the mentioned policies.

Table 6
Comparison of Provisions of ECCE in the NEPs 1998, 2009 and 2017 Stating Shift in Priorities

| Area | NEP 1998 | NEP 2009 | NEP 2017 |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|
| Policy Provision | No detail is provided. Only para 5.3.5 (p-28) talks about 'Kachi' class in one line. | The policy talks about early childhood education (ECE) on pages 27-28 in chapter 5 of the policy. It provides five policy actions. . | Chapter 4 (p 26-31) is dedicated to ECCE. This chapter talks about the ECCE in detail. There are 22 policy provisions. |
| Implementation strategy | No ECCE-specific implementation strategy was provided. | No ECCE-specific implementation strategy was provided. | Provision xxii (p 31) talks about the collaboration of ministries and departments in the preparation of an implementation plan. |
| Teacher training | No- ECCE-specific instructions for teacher training provided | Policy Action 4 and 5 (p27-28) talk about two years of specialized preservice teacher training. | Provisions regarding exclusive ECCE-based professional development programmes. |
| Curricula | No provisions however, it is stated that the curricula of | Policy Actin 5 (p 28) talks about the revision of ECE Curriculum and instructional | The review of the existing curriculum with focus on Early Learning |

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|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | 'Kachi' class shall be established in the primary cycle slowly and gradually (p 32) | material to account for cultural diversity | Development Standards (ELDS), and activity-based learning. |
| Textbook and Instructional Material | No ECCE-specific provisions | No ECCE-specific provisions | Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), and discouraging the use of Textbooks. |
| Access to ECCE | No ECCE-specific provisions | Policy Action 2 (p 27) talks about ECE age group comprising 3 to 5 years ensuring 1 year of pre-primary education to be achieved within the next ten years. | ECCE- declared as 1-year compulsory and free for children age group 4 – 5 |
| Management and Supervision | No ECCE-specific provisions | No ECCE-specific provisions | No ECCE-specific provisions |

Q. 2 What factors contributed to the formal introduction of early childhood education (ECCE) in Pakistan through Educational Policies and what measures were taken?

The analysis of related policies and literature seeking the answer to the second research question generated many themes. They are broadly divided into two main themes as indicated in Table 4: Factors Contributed towards the Formal Introduction of ECCE in Pakistan and Measures Taken for Introduction of ECCE as a Part of Main-stream Education. They are elaborated as follows:

Factors Contributed towards the Formal Introduction of ECCE in Pakistan

After the neglect of ECCE for over forty years, Pakistan had to acknowledge its significance on the verge of a new millennium due to various factors. A brief account of these factors is given below:

International Influence and Commitments: Pakistan remained a part of several international initiatives over time. Earlier ECCE was neglected in the national educational policies of Pakistan. After the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All in 2000, the government of Pakistan prepared the National Plan of Action for EFA (2001-2015 p.7) and

suggested that ECCE be introduced in the formal schooling system of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan Ministry of Education Islamabad, 2003; N. Khan et al., 2017). Several other international commitments led to the implementation of ECCE in mainstream education (Government of Pakistan, 2017). A brief account of a few is given below:

- 1 Pakistan endorsed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). in 1990. It is required to follow the articles of this convention. This can be a leading factor for paying more attention to ECCE.
- 2 Pakistan became part of the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and vowed to work on their achievement in the next fifteen years. Goal 2 of MDGs deals with universal primary education for all and its sub-goal 1 specifically talks about the provision and improvement of ECCE, specifically for deprived children. This international commitment was one of the reasons for bringing ECCE into focus (Shams et al., 2023).
- 3 Pakistan failed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) due to several factors. However, in 2015, Pakistan signed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations. SDG 4 focuses on education, with 7 sub-goals and targets. SDG 4.2 specifically emphasizes Early Childhood Education (ECCE). This is the reason both federal and provincial establishments prepared action plans to achieve these education-related targets (Government of Pakistan, 2017).
- 4 Pakistan has committed to fulfilling its promise to the international community by signing the Jomtien Declaration for Education, which also emphasizes that education starts from early childhood (Baig & Funer, 2022; Government of Pakistan Ministry of Education Islamabad, 2003, 2008 p. ix).

National Commitments: Besides international influence, several national commitments also led to the implementation of ECCE (Government of Pakistan, 2017 p.28-29). The following national commitments led to the promotion of ECCE in Pakistan:

- 1 All the provinces and the capital passed laws for enactment of Article 25 (A). These Acts ensure the provision of pre-primary or ECCE education.
- 2 The Right to Free and Compulsory Education- Article 9 of the Act 2012 (for ICT), the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Article 9 of the Act 2013 and the Punjab

Free and Compulsory Education Article 10 of the Act 2014 made it mandatory for governments to guarantee the provision of free early education for children over the age of 3 years.

- 3 All the provinces have established education sector plans both short and long-term, in partnership with international donor bodies. These plans have included such provisions that may ensure the promotion of ECCE in the corresponding provinces and have established measurable targets.

It is obvious from the above-mentioned details that both the federal and provincial governments have shown committed efforts to introducing, promoting, and institutionalizing ECCE in the country.

Measures Taken for Introduction of ECCE as a Part of Main-stream Education

Keeping all its national and international commitments in view, the government took several measures in collaboration with its allied departments and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to structuralize, provide and improve ECCE in Pakistan. A brief account of these is given below:

Measures taken at the Government Level: After realizing its significance and showing commitment to national and international demands, the government has taken several initiatives to promote ECCE in Pakistan. These initiatives are mentioned in Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment Country Report 2008 (p.94), National Plan of Action on EFA 2001-2015 (p.60-66) Pakistan Education for All Review Report 2015 (p. 18-19) and National Education Policy 2017(p.30). A brief view of the steps taken in this regard is given below:

- 1 Shaping ECCE-related policies and frameworks at the federal level by the Ministry of Federal Education and Profession Development was an important initiative.
- 2 Boosting ECCE and implementation of early learning programs, especially at the rural level was an important step taken by the National Commission for Human Development (NCHD).
- 3 NEF has helped establish centres for early childhood education and has supported efforts to improve access to education.

4 National Curriculum Council (NCC) has played a central role in developing, updating and reviewing the ECCE Curriculum according to contemporary educational standards.

5 The education departments in each province of Pakistan have implemented strategies to promote early childhood education. For example, in Punjab "Parho Punjab, Barho Punjab" project was launched to highlight the importance of early-age learning. Likewise, in Sindh, the "Early Childhood Education Model Schools" project was introduced by the government to enhance ECCE within the province.

Role of External Bodies and NGOs: The private bodies and NGOs have played a crucial role in promoting ECCE in Pakistan (Ministry of Education, 2014 p. 10-11). They addressed gaps in formal education by establishing ECCE centres and tailored programs to fit local cultures. These initiatives complemented government efforts and provided quality ECCE to children in disadvantaged communities (Baig & Funer, 2022; J. Saif et al., 2020; Shams et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2022). A brief account of initiatives taken by these organizations is given below:

- 1 Initiatives like 'Aagahi Program' focus on providing ECCE, especially in deprived communities. They aimed to deliver quality education and early learning experiences to young children irrespective of social status and financial background.
- 2 HANDS Pakistan runs the Early Childhood Development Program, giving priority to the well-being, nutrition, and education of children younger than 8 years in rural areas.
- 3 Organizations such as NRSP and PRSP established support programs for rural areas both at the national and provincial levels and made community centres that took initiatives for ECCE implementation.
- 4 SOS Children's Villages also took the initiative to implement ECCE and provide preschool education and holistic child development services.
- 5 The emphasis on highlighting the importance of early learning experiences, enhancing creativity and encouraging literacy among children through literature festivals specified for children, was also placed by organizations such as Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA)
- 6 The ECCD initiatives by the Child Aid Association emphasize on holistic approach to ECCE, general well-being and nutrition support to children in deprived areas.

These initiatives are dedicated to providing ECCE and developmental opportunities to underserved societies, minimizing educational disparities and ensuring that such children may also receive good quality foundational education.

Q. 3 What is the current state of early childhood education (ECCE) in light of recent educational policies in Pakistan?

The Current State of ECCE in Pakistan

The State of ECCE in Government Institutions

According to a report, 60% children of aged 3-5 are presently not enrolled in any ECCE program or school. Out of the remaining 40% of children enrolled in ECCE, 78% are in government schools where the facilities of ECCE are nearly non-existent. and the remaining 22% are enrolled in private schools (ASER Pakistan, 2024 p.57-61). According to the situation analysis mentioned in The National Education Policy 2017, in government institutions, neither a separate room nor a full-time trained teacher for ECCE is available. The situation in provinces is also not different where age-appropriate teaching-learning materials are not developed or disseminated. The professional development courses that have been offered in Pakistan do not fulfil the needs of children aged 3 to 5 and teachers are not aware of appropriate methodologies to cater to the requirements of ECCE (Government of Pakistan, 2017 p.28). Several surveys and studies have concluded that the facilities for the implementation of ECCE in government schools are insufficient and almost two-thirds of government primary schools have separate classrooms for the ECCE level. The situation in rural areas is more alarming where 70% of institutions do not have functional washrooms or toilets. In short, there is a need to improve the infrastructure in the government institutions to implement ECCE more effectively.

The State of ECCE in the Private Sector Institutions

The largest source of structured ECCE in Pakistan is held in the private sector (ASER Pakistan, 2024). Setting up schools has become a lucrative industry in Pakistan that has experienced significant growth in recent decades. These educational institutions cater to the requirements of middle-class households and claim to provide high-quality English-language instruction (M. A. Khan, 2018). These schools are better equipped with infrastructure and resources for implementing ECCE. They

are a larger provider of organized ECCE under various organized programmes, such as kindergarten, nursery, infant education, preschool education and ECCE. Some NGOs like the Agha Khan Foundation are also providing quality ECCE Education. Similarly, a few elite school systems also have advanced ECCE curricula and the latest facilities but they are not accessible to the vast majority of the population(J. Saif et al., 2020).

The State of ECCE in Provinces after the 18th Constitutional Amendment

After the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, the power to make educational decisions was also shifted to provinces. This made education a provincial matter where the provinces had the autonomy to implement their curriculum. Due to this power shift, the provinces implemented their policy actions (Nawaz et al., 2021(Economic Advisor's Wing Finance Division Government of Pakistan, 2023 p. 177). In Baluchistan, an improved ECCE plan was implemented with the assistance of the Agha Khan Foundation and several other donor agencies who funded the institutions, donated the teaching material and trained the teachers under the Baluchistan Education Sector Plan (2013-18). In Sindh also several reforms were announced under the SESP 2014-2018 including the making of resource centres, improvement of infrastructure and training the teachers. Similar plans were initiated in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan to uplift the quality of ECCE (N. Khan et al., 2017). Despite all efforts and measures, the out-of-school children and the lack of proper infrastructure still make it seem difficult to achieve the 4.2 SDG Goal by 2030.

Non-Governmental Contributions

NGOs and independent bodies have contributed significantly to enhancing ECCE in Pakistan (Ministry of Education, 2014 p. 10-11). Their efforts have helped the government by providing quality ECCE to children in disadvantaged communities (Baig & Funer, 2022; J. Saif et al., 2020; Shams et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2022). In this regard, The Citizen Foundation (TCF) Aagahi Program, HANDS Pakistan's Early Childhood Development Program, the National Rural Support Program (NRSP), the Punjab Rural Support Program (PRSP), SOS Children's Villages, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), Child Aid Association- the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) initiative are devoted to providing ECCE and developmental opportunities to underserved communities. Other

organizations including the Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC), The Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), Bedari, Children's Global Network Pakistan (CGN-P), Global Child Development Group (GCDG), The Indus Resource Centre (IRC) and Developments in Literacy (DIL) are also promoting ECCE initiatives in collaboration with the government of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The educational policies of Pakistan have historically neglected Early Childhood Education (ECCE) for nearly 40 years following the establishment of the state in 1947. The National Educational Policy 1998 briefly mentions early childhood education as a 'Kachi' class but does not specify any details. Although the curriculum for ECCE was first developed in 2002, it was the National Educational Policy of 2009 that laid out practical plans for its implementation. The 18th Constitutional Amendment decentralized power to the provinces, making education a provincial matter. Subsequently, each province devised its plans to reform the educational system, making efforts to implement ECCE in their respective regions. The National Curriculum was also revised following the launch of the 2017 National Educational Policy and was referred to as the Single National Curriculum of ECCE. This policy dedicated a whole chapter to ECCE and talks about several provisions, however, no action plan for implementation is provided here.

The implementation of ECCE in mainstream education was influenced by several international commitments. Following the Dakar Framework of Action for Education for All in 2000, the government of Pakistan prepared the National Plan of Action for EFA (2001-2015) and proposed the introduction of ECCE in the formal schooling system of Pakistan. Other international commitments include the signing of MDGs in 2000 and its report in 2015, as well as the commitment to SDGs and its Vision 2030. National commitments, such as the implementation of Article 25 (A), also contributed to the implementation of ECCE. The government of Pakistan, along with private organizations and international donor agencies, has been instrumental in promoting ECCE in Pakistan. While Pakistan has made significant strides in ECCE over the last 20 years, further efforts are needed to meet the commitments of SDGs and Vision 2030.

Policy Recommendations

The national educational policies of 2009 and 2017 have listed several policy provisions for improvement in ECCE in Pakistan. The National Education Policy Framework 2018 also talks about challenges and vision for improvement in ECCE, however, the implementation of policies needs due consideration and diligence. It is recommended that the progress on the implementation of policy provisions related to ECCE may be assessed quarterly by independent bodies and international partners who may inform the government about the delays and relapses irrespective of political changes. The progress on the implementation of provisions related to ECCE may be reported and published periodically to monitor the achievements of SDGs. The national institutions may be strengthened to work independently for the implementation of policies and reforms even in political instability. The donor bodies and non-governmental organizations may be encouraged to provide ECCE-specific teacher training to public sector teachers for better implementation of the ECCE curriculum. There is a need to bring consistency to the progress of provinces. In this regard, the Federal Ministry of Education may play its role in developing inter-provincial cohesion on mutual targets for progress in ECCE to meet the commitments of SDGs and Vision 2030.

Implications

- This study incorporates a qualitative approach that deals with analyzing all policy provisions related to ECCE in the national educational policies (1998, 2009, 2017), hence it is limited to the population related to the domain of ECCE curriculum developers, policymakers, administrators and educationists in Pakistan.
- This research study will be helpful for novice researchers as through its literature review and policy analysis, they can find further arenas for future studies.
- The study could be replicated using a broader range of reports and documents with a quantitative approach to better highlight the impact of policies at an institutional level.
- All levels of education institutions, including HEC, can take direction to develop further productive plans based on the findings of this study.

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