

A Study of Parents' Perceptions about Early Childhood Education and Development in the Pakistani Context

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) is an emerging field focusing on a child's holistic development and learning. The role of adults, particularly parents, are very significant in ECED. The main aim of this study was to explore the perception of parents about ECED in terms of how early enrolment in ECED provides benefits to the children. Further, this study also identified the development and learning of children in ECED programs, the time and equal opportunity that children get, and the likeness and happiness of children in ECED setups. This research was based on a quantitative study. A survey questionnaire was used to find the perception of randomly selected 100 parents. SPSS was used to analyze the data by finding Frequencies, Percentages, Mean and Standard deviation. The results portrayed that most parents have a favorable opinion about ECED and parents endorsed the benefits that provide ECED to the children. Parents also indicated family involvement in the learning of children. Further, ECED helped develop the values and morals of the children. Parents also shared that children got sufficient time and equal opportunity for play and acknowledged children's likeness to attend the ECED.

Keywords: early childhood education and development, early enrolment, equal opportunity, happiness, holistic development, learning, likeness, parents, perception, time.

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) is a significant field and nowadays a very demanding area for children. UNICEF (2018), in the strategic plan of 2018-2021, defined early childhood development as "the period from conception up to school entry." According to the Sindh Education Foundation (2009), ECED caters to age from conception to age eight. Similarly, the Ministry of Education (2007) defines that ECED starts when a mother conceives a baby in her womb and continues until eight. The effects from the conception time or first thousand days can remain with a child for a long time (Ministry of Federal Education and Training, 2017). Concisely, the early years start when a child conceives, continuing until eight. These are the crucial years for a child's development and learning.

Many nations are investing in Early Childhood to provide early care and nurture to the children so that these children will become valuable assets for the betterment and progress of the nation (World Bank Group, 2017; Sindh Education Foundation, 2011; Hunzai, 2006). Heckman (2011) mentioned that with every dollar we spend on improving early child development, we will get 7 to 10 percent or, in some cases, much higher returns on investment. That's why investing in ECD matters for reducing poverty and progressing the socio-financial conditions of the nation. For that purpose, it is required that children must have access to ECD programs and care. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goal 4.2 states that "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (Ministry of Federal Education and Training, 2017). Pakistan also includes achieving this goal and investing in Early Childhood Education and development for 100% access by the children.

In the early years, a child develops holistically, including different domains as presented in diagram 1.

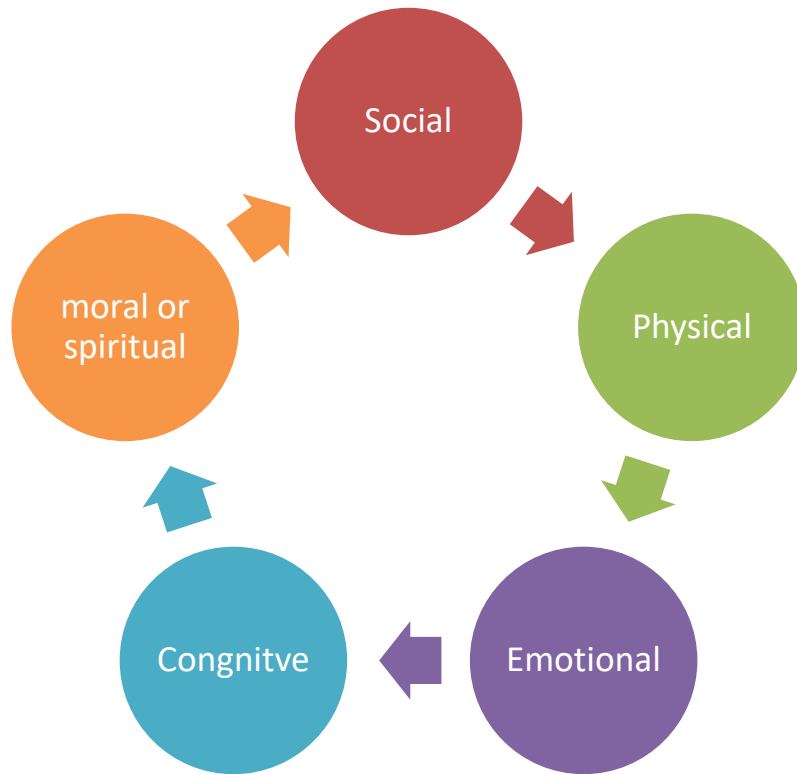


Diagram 1: Holistic Developmental Domains

The domains such as social, physical, emotional, cognitive, and moral or spiritual development of the children occur in the early years (UNICEF, 2017; Sindh Education Foundation, 2011; UNESCO, 2006). The early years provide the children with cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development through environmental interactions (UNICEF, 2018). Social interaction, touch, mental activities, feelings, and emotions are the key features for the holistic development of children. It has also been proved that a child's brain develops through neural connections in the early years based on the experiences and environment a child receives (UNICEF, 2017). In the strategic plan of UNICEF (2018), the evidence shared by Harvard University in terms of brain development of a child is "children's brains develop at a speed of over 1 million new neural connections per second, a pace that is never repeated". Early stimulation, nutrition, health,

and care from the adults help children develop their brains, allowing children to survive better in adulthood (Black et al., 2016; Lasi, Nadeem & Fatima, 2007). Play, active participation, and equal opportunity are vital factors of quality ECED programs for children's development and learning (UNICEF 2017; UNESCO 2006).

Thus, the role of adults and caregivers is very significant for developing a child, which includes the awareness and education of parents, teachers, facilitators, and management (Sindh Education Foundation, 2011). Hunzai (2006), in her research, discussed some of the reasons for unsuccessful programs of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Pakistan. She highlighted that the lack of awareness and perception about the benefits of ECE among teachers, parents, schools, and communities is one of the hurdles for sustaining the ECE programs in Pakistan. Besides the role of parents, it is also crucial to cater to the views and perception of parents towards ECED because parents who are the first contact person of a child and their concerns and choices are of for the development of a child (Sultana & Haque, 2019). In one of the studies done by Qadiri & Manhas (2017), they mentioned that "Most parents (25%) felt that children who attend early childhood development centers (ECD) cultivate good health and hygiene habits, develop preliteracy skills (19%) and communication skills (16%)". This study majorly focused on the health and nutrition of the children. Clipa (2017), in the survey, portrayed the satisfaction of parents towards ECE programs and the environment. For instance, 76% of parents were satisfied with the quality of ECE teaching, and 100% of parents were pleased with the staff. This study gave quantitative data regarding the parents' perception of ECE programming and the quality of staff. However, the qualitative research done by Sultana & Haque (2019) highlighted the importance of early education and the challenges faced by parents for their child's learning either at home or in ECE programs.

Though, numerous researches explored parents' satisfaction level and perception towards ECE or ECD programs only, which specified the environment of ECD setups and quality of ECD staff. A minimal study has focused on exploring the learning and development of the children in ECD setups. Moreover, how much children enjoy ECED arrangements and how much ECED setups provide equal opportunity and time were not explored earlier.

There was a dire need to explore parents' perception of ECED programs concerning the development and learning of a child. Moreover, how much parents think their children are happy and enjoy early childhood setups is still required to explore. As parents are prime contact persons

with the children, parents' viewpoints were needed to be measured for this study. Therefore, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify parents' perception towards Early Childhood Education and Development in the Pakistan context.
2. Explore the benefit of Early Childhood Education and Development programs in terms of early enrolment, holistic development, and learning of children.
3. Investigate how ECED provided sufficient time and equal opportunities to the children and how much children liked and felt happy in ECED setups.

This study focused on children's development and education in the early years. However, the scope of current research is limited to parents' perception only. However, this research is significant to explore the satisfaction level of parents towards ECED programs. This research also helps design the ECED program to cover the holistic dimension for a child's development and learning.

Hypothesis:

The null hypothesis of this research is that there is no significant difference in parents' perception regarding Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) for the learning and holistic development of children.

Research Methodology

This study was quantitative for analyzing and generalizing the numerical data (Adedoyin, 2020). The survey method is used to collect data from the respondents (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). The purpose of using the survey method is to gather parents' perceptions about ECED. Due to the pandemic situation and considering the SOPs of physical contact, a google survey form was developed and shared with 100 parents randomly.

A questionnaire was developed based on a Likert scale ranging from one to five, where one determined strongly agree and five specified strongly disagree. The questionnaire has two parts: the first part portrayed parents' demographic information, and the second part explored parents' perception, divided into five subparts: A. Early enrolment; B. Child's learning; C. Child's development; D. Equal opportunity and time; and E. Child's likeness and happiness.

The questionnaire was checked and reviewed by the experts to ensure validity of the questionnaire. However, the reliability of the questionnaire

was determined by calculating Cronbach's Alpha value which has shown in table 1.

Table 1
Reliability of the Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.963	22

The reliability value was 0.983, which is significant. SPSS software used descriptive and inferential statistics for data analysis, such as frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviations.

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 2 showed the demographic information of 100 parents, including different variables such as gender, age, occupation, number of children, and age for starting schooling.

Table 2
Demographic Information of Parents

Variables	Demographic	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	79	79.0
	Male	21	21.0
	Total	100	100.0
Age	18-25	1	1.0
	26-33	26	26.0
	34-41	46	46.0
	42-49	20	20.0
	50 above	7	7.0
Occupation	Self-Employed	7	7.0
	Employee	61	61.0
	Housewife	23	23.0
	Freelance	5	5.0
Number of Children	Others	4	4.0
	1	28	28.0
	2	48	48.0
	3	22	22.0
Age for starting school	4	2	2.0
	1-1.5 years	10	10.0
	1.6-2 years	26	26.0
	2-3 years	42	42.0
	3-5 years	21	21.0
	Above	1	1.0

The above information portrayed that majority of female parents participated in this study. The age group of parents was between 34-41. 61% of respondents were employed; 48% of parents have two children, and 42% started their schooling from 2-3 years old.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics Mean and Standard Deviations of Early Enrolment

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Enrolling your child in school for Early Childhood Education and Development has benefitted your child	1.95	1.095
You are satisfied by enrolling your child early for Early Childhood Education and Development	1.93	1.008
You are recommending other parents to enroll their child in Early Childhood Education and Development	1.84	1.061

Table 3 showed that the statement enrolling your child in school for Early Childhood Education and Development has benefitted your child has the highest mean score, i.e., M=1.95 and SD = 1.095. however, the statement entails recommending that other parents enroll their children for ECED was the lowest mean score, which is quite the opposite result. Parents believe that enrolling in ECED at an early age benefits their children. Whereas, at the same time, parents are not recommending the other parents to enroll in ECED.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics Mean and Standard Deviations of Child's Learning

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Early Childhood Education Development was helpful in your child's learning	1.78	.960
Early Childhood Education and Development encourages your child to learn through hands-on activities	1.79	1.038
Early childhood Education and Development encouraged the involvement of family in child's learning	1.81	1.012

According to the above analysis, family involvement in a child's learning has shown the highest mean score, i.e., $M=1.81$ and $SD = 1.012$, revealing that ECED setups acknowledge families' participation in the child's education. However, statements related to ECED setups helpful in learning the child showed the lowest mean score, which is the most considering area to focus on.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics Mean and Standard Deviations of Child's Development

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Early Childhood Education and Development helped in the physical development of your child	1.82	.999
Early Childhood Education and Development helped in the cognitive development of your child	1.68	.973
Early Childhood Education and Development helped in the social development of your child	1.72	.965
Early Childhood Education and Development helped in the emotional development of your child	1.84	1.108
Early Childhood Education and Development provided your child values and morals in the early years	1.93	1.057

The statement, ECED provided your child values and morals shown the highest mean score, i.e., $M=1.93$ and $SD = 1.057$, which is very interesting. It has commonly assumed that ECED setups particularly help children's physical and social development. However, parents who believed in a child's moral and values development in the early years reformed the current perspectives about ECED. However, this data showed the lowest mean score to the child's cognitive development as per parents' view.

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics Mean and Standard Deviations of Equal Opportunity and Time

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Early childhood Education and Development provides your child sufficient time and equal opportunity for play	2.00	1.101
Early childhood Education and Development provided sufficient time and equal opportunity for hands-on activities	1.96	1.063
Early childhood Education and Development provides equal opportunity to your child for active participation in different activities	1.93	1.027

Table 6 demonstrated that ECED provided your child sufficient time and equal opportunity for the play was the highest mean score, i.e., $M=2.00$ and $SD = 1.101$. However, active participation in different activities shows the lowest mean score. This result indicates that children got the time and equal opportunity for play; however, equal opportunity for active participation needs to be more focused.

Table 7
Descriptive Statistics Mean and Standard Deviations of Child's Likeness and Happiness

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Your child enjoyed early childhood Education and Development setups	1.87	1.041
Your child attended the Early Childhood Education and Development happily	1.86	1.083
Your child liked the Early Childhood Education and Development very much	1.86	1.073

Table 7 showed the mean value of your child enjoyed in ECED setups was high ($M=1.87$, $SD = 1.041$). however, it shows the same mean value to remaining statements i.e. $M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.073$. This result shows that children enjoyed the ECED setups very much.

Discussion

This study explored the parent's perception about Early Childhood Education and Development in terms of its benefit for early enrolment, in child's learning and development, time and equal opportunity, and children's likeness and happiness. The result showed the positive approach of parents towards ECED. Parents acknowledged the effect of ECED in their child's development; however, there is a need to be focused on the child's learning in ECED. Parents play a crucial role in a child's development and education, particularly in the early years (UNICEF 2017); thus, their satisfaction towards ECED programs is highly required to cater. This study shows the parent's satisfaction towards ECED, particularly for the child's moral development. Parents also endorsed early enrolment of their children in ECED setups for the benefit of their children. Many kinds of research suggested the early entry of children for learning or ECD programs and its effect on a child's development and mental abilities (black et al., 2008; Sayeed, 2012). For instance, black et al. (2011), in a paper titled 'too young to leave the nest,' discussed the effect of early schooling on a child's IQ levels. Sayeed (2012), in his study, 'Get it early, get it right: Early years' education in Pakistan,' shared the starting of early education at the age of three. This study also entailed the level of enjoyment of children in ECED setups as per the views of parents.

Further, children also got sufficient time and equal opportunity for play. Play is an essential part of ECED, where children learn and develop through play (UNICEF, 2017; UNESCO, 2016). Moreover, family involvement has also been encouraged in ECED programs. In their study, Voorhis et al. (2013) explored the impact of family involvement on a child's education from three years to eight years. In this study, they found that the active engagement of parents with their children brings better results.

Conclusion

This study explored parents' perceptions about ECED in the context of Pakistan. The majority of parents showed their satisfaction with ECED setups. This study also revealed the impact of ECED on a child's moral and emotional development, respectively, along with their physical and social development.

Recommendations

Certain areas are required more focus, such as active participation of children in different activities and cognitive development of children through ECED. Moreover, the learning of children in ECED is also required more consideration. Therefore, the programs of ECED need to be redesigned by incorporating the active participation of children in activities. Moreover, activities and stimulations are also required to add to ECED programs that increase the children's cognition. This study further guides future researchers for in-depth studies, mainly qualitative analyses, to investigate parents' perceptions. Moreover, observations of ECED setups or programs, program designing, and planning can also be studied for future researches.

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