
**ECD EDUCATORS' OUTLOOK ON EARLY YEARS' CURRICULUM AND
PEDAGOGY FOSTERING CHILDRENS HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT**

Rozina Jumani

M.Phil Scholar at HIESS

Dr Ahmad Saeed

Research Supervisor at HIESS

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to explore educators' views on children's the early years' curriculum and pedagogy implemented in Pakistan. This research study is grounded in qualitative design i.e. case study. The case included examining educators, the early years' and school managers' critical reflections on children's learning and development during the early years' education. This research study is first of its kind in the context of Pakistan as the early years teachers' views about their teaching practices have rarely incorporated in recent studies.

The main finding of this study was that curriculum and pedagogies used in early years' program has never been concentrated earlier as potential research themes. Though many research studies have been conducted on the implementation of ECE programs, but not any specific study concentrated on matching curriculum goals with its implementation to facilitate children's holistic development.

It was learnt that national curriculum framework 2007 is not followed in most ECE classes. The main reason was found that many practitioners i.e. educators and managers have not seen or read it. Consequently, national philosophy is compromised while nurturing children holistically

It is therefore recommended for teachers and educators to study the national and now provincial curriculum framework because it has set a benchmark as what to achieve and suggested how to achieve the goals.

Keywords: Early years' education program, implementation of curriculum framework, pedagogy, holistic development, assessment

INTRODUCTION

This study explores educators' stances on curriculum approaches and pedagogies practiced and implemented in the early years' classroom setting. Researchers from Harvard University (2007) mentioned that Early Childhood is a critical stage of life in children's physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development and their well-being. From conception to eight years during this period, the brain

develops so much and so rapidly laying important foundations that affect learning. Increasingly complex behaviours and skills emerge and progress at a very quick pace and this process of development is continuous and ongoing. During this time children need responsive care giving, nurturing and rich learning experiences for their holistic development. It is therefore essential in current times to reflect critically on the salient features of teaching and learning practices in the early years because it influences shaping the lives of children who attend these early years' classes.

This study on early childhood education is crucial in manifolds. First, it intends to explore the significant changes in education and particularly in the early years' education occur at global level with the 'No Child Left Behind' policy (2001). Secondly, it enables government of Pakistan's commitment to invest in improving teachers' education in the early years as most of early childhood teachers enter in teaching profession with little systematic and quality teacher education (ECED Teachers Guide, 2011). Thirdly, it is critical to review the implementation pedagogies in the early years as all children deserve the best possible to begin their lives which assures their holistic development.

This research study is grounded in qualitative case design (Creswell, 2009; Prasad, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 1993; 1994). The case included exploring and examining educators and the early years' school managers' critical reflections on children's learning and development during the early years' education. This research study is first of its kind in the context of Pakistan as the early years teachers' views about their teaching practices have rarely incorporated in recent studies.

The objective of the study was to identify how educators, teachers, and management work in collaboration with parents to facilitate over all development of learners. The principal research question was how educators view the early years' curriculum and pedagogy implemented in their contexts; and subsidiary question was what are the current practices of the early years' educators that facilitate learners' experiences in their holistic development?.

The most significant aspect of this study enables to capture the early years' practitioners' stance on how curriculum and pedagogies being implemented in their contexts. It was interesting to note that the term 'curriculum' and 'pedagogy' varied from each educator or practitioner. In the context of Pakistan, due to unavailability of systematic quality teacher education programs for early years' education, effective curriculum implementation needs more concentration.

Due to diversity of ECE practices across country, the researcher could only concentrate on first 2 years in particular. The reason is quite obvious as only a few schools cater to 4 years of developmental program of early years, where as in most of the scenarios across Karachi, ECD is run as 2 years' program i.e. Pre I and II, also known as KG I & II, ECD I & II, hence for this study 2 years of education have been focused.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Early Childhood Education concentrates on development and care of children ages 0-8 through meaningful engagement that facilitate their overall development so they would become creative, confident and successful adults in their later stages of life (Miller and Pound, 2010). Though both developed and developing countries aim to facilitate young children in their tender age of growth, however, their age concentration varies as for developed countries the critical period of intervention and development is from ages 0-8, whereas developing countries concentrate their efforts until ages 0-6 of early childhood (UNICEF, 2002).

The concept of 'holistic development' commonly known as overall development means children's physical, social, cognitive spiritual and emotional development (Evans *et.al.*, 2000). Literature reveals profound definitions of the term 'holistic development' suggested by various curriculum documents and scholars (McDevitt and Ormrod, 2010); some are crisp but comprehensive whereas others are detailed. According to UNICEF (2006), holistic development entails all programs and policies indicate children's rights to health, nutrition, protection that are met, including cognitive and psychosocial development. Dewey (1938) emphasizes the notion of 'learning by doing' where in this interactive yet social process children will get many opportunities to actualize their potentials to the maximum. Vygotsky (1978) also known as 'Social constructivist' believes that children construct their knowledge through social interactions in an environment. While elaborating his notion about Zone for Proximal Development (ZPD), he endorses the ideas that children can perform tasks that are more challenging if facilitation and scaffolding from adults is available to them. Bose (2010) with the view that development occur at fast paced during 0-8 years thus holistic development covers child's physical, educational, psychological, sociological, historical, philosophical and health related needs.

The importance of the early years in children's learning has been gaining momentum for quite long both at international level and at national levels. At local level, a lot of emphasis has been put on families and communities so they could facilitate the children to start with better

lives. At national level, governments are committed to invest on providing quality provision in the early years' education (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Shonkoff *et.al.*, 2009). The importance of early childhood education policy also represents the commitment from not only national but also international organizations such as UNESCO and World Bank.

Policy makers are aware of the fact that educational investments on the early years' education yield the highest returns for any penny that has been invested (Grunewald and Rolnick, 2003). A significant characteristic is that the people who participate in enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete their schooling and less likely to engage into health related issues or illegal activities (Vimpani, 2005). However, many argue that early childhood programs only focusing on children's future contribution in society doesn't suffice, it is equally important to concentrate on programs facilitating children's holistic development, their lives, families and communities in present also. Greishebar (2009) further illustrated that equitable access to quality early childhood education programs must not depend on family income or employment status, lower socioeconomic or vulnerable groups, nor it is restricted by age, race or ethnicity rather all programs must be accessible to all focusing on 'inclusion and equal opportunity' for all.

Another deliberation among early childhood researchers on brain development arguing a shift from 'child care' to 'children's development, socialization and learning' (Press and Hayes, 2000) because children construct their own meaning via socialization with people, places, things and contexts which will contribute in their development rather than just treating them from care perspective. In this regards, many projects were initiated such as 'development of child and family centres, health integrated programs, such as, 'Kids matter and Minds matter' for positive and meaningful engagement rather than just drilling prerequisites skills or abilities for getting them into schools (Dockett and Perry, 2007). Children preparation for prior-to-school is seen as children's ability to show narrow range of social skills (Pianta and Cox, 1999) however, social and interpersonal skills are equally important as other academic skills (La Paro and Pianta, 2000).

Contemporary researches on the early years challenge that children must be viewed as citizens with entitlements and rights. For that reason, children are no more passive recipients of knowledge transmitted by adults; rather children are active agents who process, who can construct meaning on their own and voice their ideas openly (Giroux, 1989).

'Children belong to family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community (Deewar, 2009:7). It is important for educators to reflect on how children, their families, and the communities they belong to feel connected with the early years' setting. However, despite all differences and uniqueness, they are inclusive as a part of the community. It is important to explore diversity that exists within educational settings and because of this richness in experiences, interests, abilities, traditions, beliefs and values, children possess diverse yet collaborative experiences, competencies, and different learning styles. It is therefore, crucial to include learning framework with multiple pedagogies responding to their learning needs. When educators are knowledgeable about the experiences, social practices and languages that children bring from homes, then they would be able to include these resources, experiences and pedagogies that represent the diversity of children, families and communities and support the children to achieve learning outcomes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The nature of main research problem and related subsidiary questions led towards 'interpretive paradigm' that is more concerned with individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It fosters individuals' interpretations rather than generalizations. Bryman (2012:19-20) elaborates that 'Interpretivists tend to focus their attention on the way people make sense of the world and how they create their social world through their actions and interpretations of the world'.

This research study was a case study intend to explore educators' outlook on children's early years curriculum and pedagogy in view of Transnational Paradigm, national parameters and its implementation in Pakistan, which is 'intrinsic' in its nature (Silverman, 2001). In the words of Yin (1993:3), 'The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguished from its context'.

For this study, purposive sampling was used which enable researcher to seek 'information-rich cases' (Patton, 1990:169) from 70 participants including educators, managers and parents of children studying in early years. The purposive sample is a non-probability sampling which is based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Research data collected through a combination of methods including document analysis, focus group discussions, and self-administered questionnaire with educators and management.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Teaching Pedagogies that Support National Curriculum Implementation: According to Gestwicki (2007), it is teachers' duty to make learning meaningful by enabling learning in all areas of children development in the early years for instance, physical, social, emotional, linguistics, aesthetic, cognitive and moral development.

Educators' Responses on Pedagogies Used to Support National Curriculum Implementation: An educator stated that 'the curriculum that focuses on learning by doing actually making children independent. They are able to manage their learning on their own' (EO15, January 2018). Another educator said that 'we provide them different opportunities to make them confident, independent and build their critical thinking' (EO02-FGD, 10th April, 2018).

While sharing a few activities, an educator mentioned that 'there are a lot of hands-on interactive activities happening in the classrooms. For example, if we have a theme of fruits for the month, we tell children all about fruits as to where they grow how many seeds they have etc. bring in real fruits from the market, and make them feel and taste them. In addition, cooking activities are conducted according to the theme' (EO28, January 2018). An educator added that 'in our schools, mostly lesson plan prepared with the help of national curriculum which is very beneficial for the teachers as well as for the children' (EO11-FGD, 10th April 2018).

There were a few educators (EO05, EO08, EO09, and EO16-FGD) during FGD sessions denied the use of national curriculum in the early years' program run in their schools, rather they are using their own syllabus, which is often called as curriculum. An educator said that 'we don't use national curriculum as we have own' (EO14-FGD, 10th April 2018), another educator informed that 'I take only guideline of national curriculum and design my syllabus and their activities' (EO03-FGD, 10th April, 2018).

An educator responded that 'Almost all the teachers apply their framework in one way or other' (EO01-FGD, 10th April 2018). Another educator elaborated her point that 'The ideas are taken from the national curriculum and have been incorporated according to the standard of the school as the content mentioned in the curriculum is not up to the level that the school is maintaining' (EO19, January 2018).

Managers' Responses on Pedagogies Used to Support National Curriculum Implementation: Like educators, most managers during FGD sessions commented that they are not aware of national curriculum for early years and using their own scheme of planning. A manager shared that 'well I am not very well aware of national ECD curriculum

(MO08-FGD, 15th February, 2018). On the other hand, another manager told that 'National ECD curriculum per se is a great framework for ECD education and educators but it is hardly taken into consideration in teaching practices not only in government schools but also in most of the private schools across the country' (MO05-FGD, 15th February, 2018).

A manager shared that 'I think National ECD curriculum framework does not apply basic ingredients, the syllabus provides no opportunity for arts and crafts and pre-vocational exposure' (MO11-FGD, 15th February 2018). Another manager told that 'In my opinion national curriculum is not up to the mark/level for our students. The children of our society are forward from the benchmark of ECD curriculum' (MO07-FGD, 15th February 2018).

One manager emphasized that 'I am not satisfied from curriculum of Pakistan, its needs to be effective and flexible' (MO12-FGD, 15th February 2018).

On the other hand, a few managers were found familiar with the notion of curriculum and they said that 'the National Curriculum developers have developed the curriculum keeping the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in their minds, according to the context which can be adopted in any setting (urban/rural) within Pakistan. The thing I like most is the sample activities along with the learning standards. This helps teachers/educators to understand what the standard demand to do' (MO02-FGD, 15th February 2018). 'Besides, it contains everything related to ECED, how a daily schedule of an ECD should seem like though it is a complete guidebook for any ECD teacher' (MO13-FGD, 15th February 2018).

One manager appreciated and said that 'It is a good initiative to promote safe play and activity based learning which is completely in contrast to the rote learning method imposed on children in Pakistan. It is focusing on all the seven areas of learning and is trying to meet international standards' (MO10-FGD, 15th February 2018).

Another manager said that 'I think the framework of national ECD curriculum is designed accurately. One of the strongest point is that it develops the child in early age' (MO09-FGD, 15th February 2018).

It is important to note that participants' response indicate that not all educators and managers have sound understanding and clarity of national curriculum and how it is to be implemented despite the guidebooks of TRC and AKU-IED are available; nor schools are taking special measure for its effective implementation.

Assessing Children's Learning for Their Holistic Development:

Assessing children is important as it assists educators in instruction and curriculum decisions; it determines children's learning and progress and evaluates how a program is meeting its goals for the children (Katz, 1997).

Educators' Responses on How Learning is Assessed to Ensure Holistic Development of Children: Educators' responses on assessment were general in nature. A group of educators during FGD sessions shared that 'we assess children's learning from their class room participation such as presentation' (EO23-FGD, 10th April, 2018), 'group work' (EO24-FGD, 10th April, 2018), 'group discussions' (EO25-FGD, 10th April, 2018), 'by asking questions' (EO08-FGD, 10th April, 2018), 'by providing different scenarios' (EO13-FGD, 10th April, 2018).

Another educator shared that 'by observing them and by asking them different questions'. 'At times, I give them concrete material and ask for a specific concept that the children have to use the material to get the answer' (EO19, January 2018). An educator did not share details but wrote that 'I assess the children learning in classroom by different assessment techniques' (EO12, January 2018).

During FGD sessions, a few educators commented that 'we observe children and their participation in different activities (EO02 -FGD, 10th April, 2018), another told that 'a teacher needs to assess through activities, written and verbal' (EO06-FGD, 10th April 2018). An educator shared her experience by sharing that 'I like to assess my children through play and using the environment where they can express themselves and identify and say something they saw, experienced and felt with ease. However, the school has provided us with assessment sheets that we fill out on a monthly basis to know whether the child is academically at par with the other children' (EO29-FGD, 10th April 2018).

Another educator shared her practices on focusing child's past and present learning comparison by saying that 'we normally assess a child by going through their term progress. We compare with how were they in the beginning and how are they doing now in the term end' (EO22-FGD, 10th April 2018). Another commented that 'we maintained checklists, rubrics, anecdotal records, and narrative writing' (EO30-FGD, 10th April 2018).

An educator concluded this discussion on assessment by saying that 'the teachers have strong self-efficacy that provides high level of motivation to their students who then seek higher achievement'. She further added that 'the grades and academic achievement are the

reflections of teachers' competencies along with their qualification (EO15-FGD, 10th April 2018).

Managers' Responses During FDG Sessions Regarding How Learning is Assessed to Ensure Holistic Development of Children:

While responding to the purpose of assessment a manager quoted that 'a teacher if not qualified for early years' education, will never understand the importance of the developmental stages taking place in a child's life and can mishandle the needs. She will either turn out to be a traditional teacher who just speaks or not be able to provide the holistic assistance a child specifically needs (MO01-FGD, 15th February 2018).

With naive approach to teaching and curriculum implementation, educators have difficulty in managing classes properly. An educator said that 'the difficulty I face mainly is that children don't want to do written work. They are happy with oral work and understand the concept when doing orally but when it comes to written, they just want to run away from the class (EO22-FGD, 10th April 2018). This shows that assessment and related techniques are quite a remote concept for educators and teachers because most of them considered 'conclusion part of their lessons as assessment', others take 'tests' in the name of assessment but these do not provide how learning took place and what were the gaps in those concepts which need reinforcement' (EO22-FGD, 10th April, 2018).

Lack of professional facilitation and time are the main hindrance of ineffective assessment system prevailing in the early year's education. An educator quoted that 'children need more and more activities to understand curriculum, sometimes it is difficult to think of some activities. Timing is also a barrier' (EO32-FGD, 10th April 2018).

CONCLUSION

Though this qualitative study incorporated early years' educators and managers in ECE and the researcher managed to seek responses from 70 participants, however, the results cannot be generalized to overall population of children studying in ECE across province Sindh.

It is important to note that no qualitative research was conducted on whether the national curriculum framework enable children's holistic development and what are the gaps and what more could be done. It is important to consider this study as the preliminary exploration of quality aspects of curriculum and pedagogies used in ECE classes. This study can be strengthened once mixed methods could be employed which will become instrumental for the availability of more robust programs for the children studying in early years setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is highly recommended for teachers and educators to study the national curriculum framework because it has set a benchmark as what to achieve and suggests how to achieve the goals. There are many schools who claim that national curriculum is 'substandard document' as commented by a few educators nevertheless, it provides clarity of minimum goals to be achieved together as a nation.

Another important recommendation is for school leaders to collaborate with parents for facilitating holistic development of children. Despite many schools try to create best environment for learning but if this initiative is not linked with home where children spend more time than school, notion of holistic development cannot be nurtured properly. Educational leaders, managers, and teachers educators will only be able to achieve this tall claim of fostering holistic children of children with parents' support and their partnership.

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