Early Learning Partnership Systems Research: Phase 1 (2017-19)

SUMMARY BRIEF

The Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Systems Research Program is a multi-country research program that aims to diagnose the status of early learning in Pakistan (the Punjab province), Ethiopia, Liberia and Tanzania through a systems lens. This program has two goals: 1) to produce actionable evidence for policymakers nationally and 2) to build the early learning systems evidence base internationally. This document summarizes findings from the ELP systems research conducted in Punjab, Pakistan in 2017-19.

Background: *Policy, Reform and Budgeting*

The province of Punjab has made significant strides towards providing access to quality ECE since 2013/14. The Government of Punjab through its School Education Department (SED) has included ECE formally in the Right to Free & Compulsory Education Act 2014 (Article 10), thereby extending the constitutional entitlement of Article 25-A from 3-16 years of age instead of the mandated 5-16 years. The legislation has been matched by a provincial ECE Policy 2017 and currently a significant number of schools (12525 in total with 7000 fully functional and 5000 where provision of kits and training is in process) are implementing the ECE program. This has been rolled out within modest budgets since 2013/14 and scaled up through a whole district approach model, demonstrated by UNICEF jointly with SED. These steps have created a strong foundation for ECE, as envisaged in Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDG 4.2), backed by political will, legal and policy provision, sector planning, financing and implementation on the ground. There is evidence of government welcoming innovative partnerships across departments for ECE and through development partners, INGOs and NGOs to complement its resolve for testing and scaling up its efforts for the sub-sector. Furthermore, the provincial government has not just focused on direct provision of ECE, but also through public-private partnerships funding under the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) schools which are another major actor in the sub-sector. There are multi-sectoral initiatives in place that incorporate different elements of a holistic early learning environment such as health and nutrition through the "health and nutrition supervisors (H&N)" cadre in primary schools since 2015. Punjab singularly stands out as a pioneer province on strong ECE implementation thus far in Pakistan. The ownership of the model and its mainstreaming within the system has been well reflected in the recently announced policy document "The New Deal 2018-2023" where setting up of child-friendly classrooms facilitated by trained teachers and equipped with extensive learning material has been prioritized. (pg 15)

An extensive analysis of provincial budgets from 2016 onwards reveals that ECE is increasingly being reflected as a separate sub-sector with its own needs. The government is shifting from an incremental approach to a more holistic and structured one of ECE financing, as envisaged in the 2017 ECE Policy. The government now has specific provisions for ECE in its yearly budget titled, *"Introduction of Early Childhood Education in Primary Schools in Punjab with highest enrollment & Improvement of Environment of Schools to convert them into Child-Friendly Schools"* from FY

2016-2017 onwards. However, expenses such as workforce salaries, training and support, among others are still not fully incorporated into those provisions reflecting systems level incoherence that could lead to challenges of predictable flows and sustainability.

There are different pre-primary grades in the province, making monitoring and evaluation a challenging task. This is a consequence of disparate ECE/pre-school grades in operation by frontline service providers, which results in potentially under-counting and conceptual confusion in both service-provision, planning and budgets. For instance, the service-providers use the terms 'katchi', 'pakki', 'nursery' and ECE interchangeably making it difficult to define an ECE Programme. This ambiguity is reflected in the budget where the scope and exact nature of the 'official ECE programme' may not be clearly delineated. Given the challenge of tracking SDG 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 there is a need for early resolution of indicators and their tracking.

Within this context, the ELP Systems Research Program was undertaken by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) between April 2017-December 2018, funded by the World Bank and DFiD.

Methodology and Data Collection

Phase 1 of the project was focused on building evidence on program quality and learning outcomes through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research carried out across three districts of the Punjab: Bahawalpur, Toba Tek Singh, and Rawalpindi.

The quantitative research provided data on ECE programme quality and early learning outcomes using the global Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes (MELQO) modules. After mapping the items to the Pakistan National Curriculum for ECE (2007) and the national Early Learning and Development Standards (2009), five tools were adapted to the Pakistan context. The tools were selected to capture an array of characteristics of the ECE programmes and learning preparedness of children aged 3-5 years for analysis. These tools were administered to 672 children, 484 parents/caregivers in 99 schools in 3 districts, inclusive of classroom observations, head teacher/director interviews and teacher interviews. Of these 99 schools, 75 were public schools, 15 were Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) schools and 9 exclusively private schools. To fully contextualize parental engagement and perceptions, qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), carried out in 17 of the 99 schools where 120 parents from the MELQO surveyed class participated in 30-45 min sessions, sharing their thoughts on ECE and its dimensions. Additional qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders on the nature and diversity of various service provisions as well as on accountability parameters and structures within those provisions.
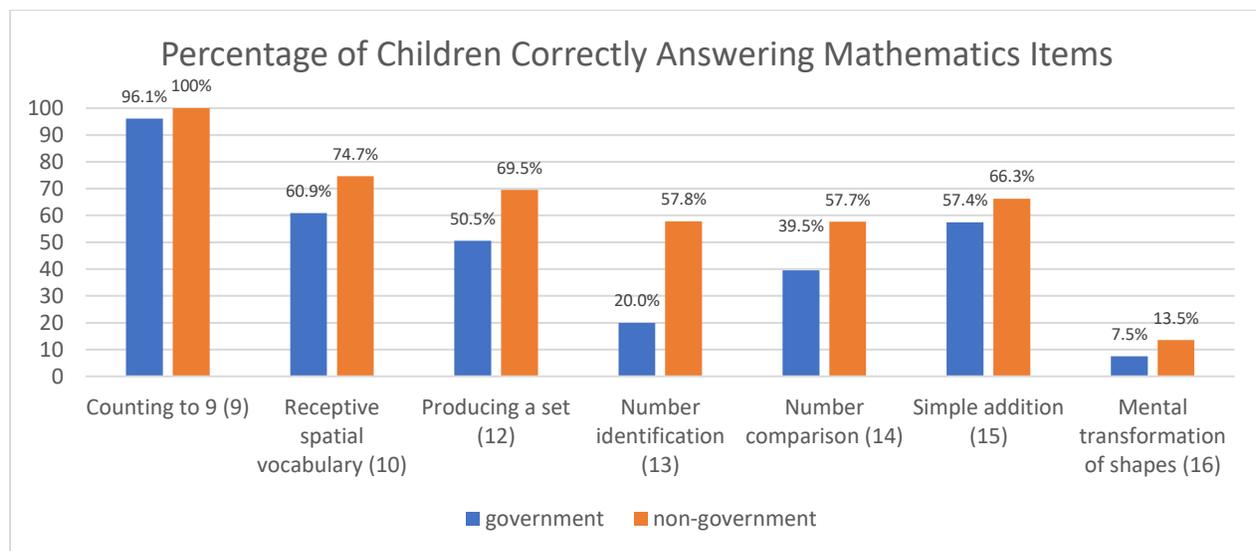
ECE Programme Quality and Learning Outcomes: *Findings from the MODEL and MELE Surveys*

The findings from the survey reflect differences in program quality and learning outcomes across regions and provider-types. However, because of the small sample size of 99 schools, we cannot

draw conclusions about statistical significance of these differences. Overall, there are positive results in program quality and learning outcomes in some areas while relatively average results in others.

Our findings relating to language and literacy reflect that a majority of classrooms, as high as 88% in public schools, have language and literacy as part of their lesson plans and daily timetables. Simpler literacy activities, such as letter identification and phonics, were more commonly observed than others, such as book reading and opportunities for conversation. Teaching through memorization and repetition was a commonly used teaching approach, even in the most embellished of ECE rooms. However, in nearly 40% of the government schools at least one quality approach was observed[1].

With regards to mathematics/numeracy skills, mathematics was more likely to be observed as part of the lesson plans and daily timetable than literacy and language. Children appeared to do well in counting and verbal mathematics tasks. For example, 96% of children from government schools could count up to nine and 60.9% could identify spatial vocabulary terms such as *on*, *under*, and *in front of* (Figure 1). However, identifying written numbers and mental transformation of shapes appeared to be challenging for most children.

Percentage of Children Correctly Answering Mathematics Items

Item	government	non-government
Counting to 9 (9)	96.1%	100%
Receptive spatial vocabulary (10)	60.9%	74.7%
Producing a set (12)	50.5%	69.5%
Number identification (13)	20.0%	57.8%
Number comparison (14)	39.5%	57.7%
Simple addition (15)	57.4%	66.3%
Mental transformation of shapes (16)	7.5%	13.5%

(Figure 1: Reported from MODEL Direct Assessment Tool)

Moving to children's personal and social development, teachers were observed supporting children's personal and social development through engaging in positive interactions and minimal use of physical punishment. For instance, in 75% of the government schools there were clear attempts to use positive disciplining practices or redirect negative behavior instead of using

---

[1] rating of quality approaches: 1) children have some choice in how to carry out an activity 2) children explore and play with concrete objects to learn about concept 3) teacher engages children in discussion using open ended questions 4) teacher connects lessons to real life or every-day experiences

negative verbal interaction with children. Low engagement of children and the lack of ability to move around in different groupings are two interconnected issues that can influence personal and social learning which are potentially related to large class sizes. There is some evidence that gender equality and diversity are being promoted within as many as 80% of the government schools specifically deploying positive strategies (Figure2).

Rating	Encourages stereotypes or inequity (1)		Calls on one gender more than another (2)		Calls on boys and girls equally (3)		Encourages participation of all children, and engages in activities to counter gender roles (4)	
MELE ITEM	Govt.	Private*	Govt.	Private	Govt.	Private	Govt.	Private
Teacher encourages equal participation of boys and girls (24)	2.7%	0.0%	16.0%	4.2%	61.3%	70.8%	20.0%	25.0%

(Figure 2: Reported from MELE Classroom Observation Tool.
*Private includes both PEF and exclusively private schools)

ECE Service Provision: *Findings from Informant Interviews and FGDs.*

In terms of quality of service provision and management, our findings suggest that the ECE support package in public schools comprises a strong ECE curriculum, teaching and learning materials, a teacher and a caregiver-assistant and a training programme that includes the teacher/assistant and headteacher, spearheaded by the SED and its apex training body, the Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED). There is evidence of an appetite among the workforce for extended and additional opportunities to become 'effective ECE teachers.' The same demand has come from teachers of ECE from PEF/private schools as well, signifying that teachers need additional support to become confident ECE facilitators. The government/SED is also hiring low cost local ECE caregivers who are proving to be a useful component of the service provision through increased community engagement. *These local ECE caregivers make an important case for workforce diversification during current and future scale up phases.*

ECE Community Engagement: *Findings from MODEL Survey and FGDs*

FGDs with parents across majority of the surveyed schools (nearly 94.1%) suggest that there are systemic barriers to effective community engagement and accountability. Erratic and/or asymmetrical Information sharing within provider-client relationships, with relatively low financial contribution from parents restricts the ability of some actors to fully participate in

official ECE settings and affect change. For instance, lack of complete information about program quality and provision makes it harder for parents to identify and demand for higher quality services. Such barriers are relatively more visible in rural areas. The research also indicates that government schools have generally more avenues of accountability of service-providers either through regular monitoring from SED or individual school councils. Furthermore, there is clear indication that parents and communities are aware of ECE and its positive returns. Parents are invested in their child's education and willing to contribute, given their limited resources. The parents also display visible trust in ECE faculty and administration in schools. There are cases which demonstrate that their contributions and trust in service providers can be leveraged for quality improvement in ECE programs. However, there are still structural and perception issues that restrict parental involvement in ECE directly and/or through school councils which should be further investigated.

ECE Financing: *Findings from the MODEL Survey and FGDs*

ECE financing shows variation by region and provider. While there are no school fees in SED/PEF schools, parents have to carry the burden of non-academic costs in ECE affecting their own financial capacity. These costs include, uniforms, supplementary books and stationary. Transport costs are particularly a major issue for parents in rural areas as this was repeatedly emphasized in around 90% of the surveyed schools. FGDs also suggest that parents, especially from non-government /private schools, struggle to translate their limited contributions into an effective tool for provider accountability. Thus, there is a skewed accountability relationship between parents and service-providers. Parents are also less aware of their rights and entitlements as citizens, particularly with reference to ECE service-provision.

Levers for Change in ECE: Policy Recommendations

Our policy recommendations presented in this section are based on the data collected across 99 schools in three districts of the province, supported by FGDs and KIIs. We would like to reiterate that despite the limited dataset, the survey captures useful information about the three major types of service-providers (two financed by the government and one purely private), indicating the scope and features of various choices pursued by different actors that affect financing, equity and access/provision within the sub-sector. Moreover, the MODEL and MELE tools examine all related dimensions of ECE in quantifiable forms that reveal discernible patterns in service-provision, program quality and learning outcomes within the sub-sector.

As mentioned in the section on policy and budgeting, the government has managed to implement ECE policies and reforms in a substantive way. However, when seen through a systems lens there are recognizable asymmetries that stand out not just in the client-provider relationship but also within the overall ECE system itself. The following policy recommendations emerge from these identified challenges in the ECE systems and relationships.

1. *Improving data on enrolment & transition rates and clarity on ECE terminology*

- With multiple pre-primary streams (the traditional grades of katchi/nursery/pakki and a more recent introduction of a better provisioned ECE) running concurrently in government primary schools across the Punjab, there exists ambiguity around what constitutes an ECE provision. The terminology used for pre-primary streams should be clearly established by the SED and understood by the frontline service providers at the local level to fully capture optimized enrollment figures for each stream and tracking of individual children.
- The current official rule for age of entry into early childhood program appears to be a consistently relaxed in practice across Punjab. A study previously conducted by ITA across 139 schools of the Punjab (2017) on age demographics of students enrolled in the ECE classrooms provides evidence on the prevalence of multi-age range patterns and enrollment of over-age children (10+) in ECE classrooms. There is a need for expanding the research into the distribution of age patterns of children and training/support offered to the workforce on how to effectively manage multi-age prevalence in ECE classroom. The same data should also be utilized to determine the provisions for older children to ascertain the level and scope of learning preparedness interventions in ECE.
- The ECE to primary transition rates and learning patterns should be probed further to plan a child's entire ECE journey; SED can thus provide extra attention to areas/programs/schools where the transition figures are low.

2. *Improving quality through capacity-building of workforce (frontline providers)*

- Streamlining the ECE workforce, their continuous professional development and support is an urgent need articulated in the Punjab ECE Policy 2017 and as also highlighted in the survey. There is an urgency to clarify and explore options for a dedicated ECE teaching cadre and caregiver assistants for sustainability.
- With a majority of teachers reporting that the training they have received was not sufficient for them to be an effective pre-primary teacher, the current training period of 5 days should be reconsidered and a more comprehensive hybrid training program devised with cluster and school based support, which includes not only the current content but other ECE components such as social emotional skills, positive disciplining, child health and play/ engagement of parents and caregivers.
- Teachers/assistants and headteachers need better grasp of literacy/numeracy and relevant learning competencies for ECE as identified in the Curriculum and ELDs -with respect to pedagogy/play, appropriate learning materials and collaborative assessments shared with parents.

3. *Increase community engagement through utilizing school councils and regular parent-provider meetings*

- Given the existence of School Councils in every government school, their potential could be utilized optimally by ensuring that parents from ECE also have the opportunity to formally participate as active members, are allowed to raise their concerns and hold schools accountable for quality.
- Focused data collection would help to ascertain the current status of School Councils; helping to revive where these are dormant/passive, for accountability and support to ECE.
- Improved information flows by encouraging robust feedback loops between parents and frontline service-providers through regular parent-teacher meetings.
- Most parents are not aware of the monthly/quarterly School Quality report cards displayed in the headteachers' rooms in government schools. [2]By simplifying, reporting and disseminating the ECE quality standards to the stakeholders, the government can create new feedback loops with clients, their satisfaction and accountability avenues.

4. *Improve financing through holistic and all-inclusive budget provisions*

- Clear categorization of all ECE budgets such as teacher/caregiver salaries, trainings and support and other significant intra and inter-departmental costs will ensure that all portions of the subsector costing/financing are fully incorporated and provisioned for in the ECE budget. A clear definition of what an ECE programme entails, including its capital and recurrent costs should be agreed upon and subsequently reflected in recurrent and development budgets for sustainability of improved programs.
- Shifting towards a holistic ECE budget which also incorporates other elements of early learning environments such as nutrition, health, social safety net instruments (health and nutrition) and household care. The provisioning for these elements should be directly reflected in ECE core and associated costs.

---

[2] School Data and Information shared with Schools and on SED's school portal website