As the global education systems transition into the next decade and in a post-COVID world, the efforts towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 have taken an unprecedented urgency. This is particularly the case for early years developmental milestones including learning as encoded in SDG 4.2—all girls and boys being provided access to quality early childhood education by 2030. To achieve this critical goal, multiple efforts have been made at the global and the national level, but sadly with insufficient speed. In Pakistan, where an officially estimated 10 million children are already enrolled in early years schooling, but a significant number of children in that age bracket are also out-of-school, the efforts towards universal ECE have transformed into a priority area for its pivotal potential in reaching the targets of infant and under-5 mortality rates (IMR/USMR), health, nutrition, learning and to maternal mortality and wellbeing.

ECE policies were instituted across two of Pakistan’s provinces in the previous decades, 2014 for Sindh and 2017 for Punjab. These were subsequently accompanied by upgraded curriculum that incorporated the recent research on early years learning along with the development of monitoring systems. There have also been attempts at developing ECE-specific cadres of teachers and officers as well as defining clear nomenclature for early years grades. All these efforts were developed to the next stage of implementation with the introduction of Single National Curriculum 2020 for ECE which further built upon the learning and development outcomes in provincial curricula. There has thus been sustained activity in this subsector.

The upcoming National Education Policy 2021 is expected to further upgrade and accelerate efforts. The first thought paper on NEP 2021 delineates ECE as one of the four pillars on which the education system is to be built, with accompanying financing and governance structures. The paper also discusses the appropriate age for ECE and primary schooling in children and suggests affirmation in consultation with PSLM, that 6 years is the appropriate age for attending primary. However, there are still gaps remaining in the provision of ECE within Pakistan. The onset of COVID-19 has highlighted this even further. First, despite efforts for ECE in the previous years, it did not feature as a priority area in government’s plans for education during school closures,
including in the National Education Response and Resilience Plan for COVID-19 which focused on K-12. ECE is in need of further prioritization as a foundational pillar.

ITA in its Paper on Pivots for the NEP 2021 states the imperatives of holistic ECE. The anchor investment in early years 0-8 converges with the challenges and opportunities for health, nutrition, population and education targets. Human learning during this period as programmed by nature progresses at an accelerated pace due to intensive brain development, its wiring/rewiring. To continue thinking of ECE as a peripheral engagement leads to tragic outcomes in all indicators including child mortality, growth/ stunting, malnutrition and learning. ECE must be given its rightful space in collaboration with the Ministries/Depts of Health, Nutrition, P&D Reforms Initiatives, Scaling up Nutrition in Pakistan, Ehsaas (Nashonuma),¹ NADRA/CRC/Birth Registration and Education all together. The latter approach will spread benefits costs across ministries and multiply benefits a million times for. Attempts in this regard are being made through various programs of the School Education and Literacy Dept. Sindh, SED Punja and Ehsaas Nashonuma program for early childhood care and education and there is space for more. Recommendations from other stakeholders have touched upon similar themes. AKF lays out the possibility incorporating the right to pre-primary education into the Constitution. The suggestions also include the development of a cadre of well qualified and skilled early years educators.

As the pandemic highlights, non-cognitive learning has become a key focus area across all age groups that has to be incorporated in education systems globally. Executive function which is now called ‘learning’ is being increasingly recognized as a major domain in early learning. UNICEF’s updated Early Childhood Development Index 2030 incorporates four major domains of early learning. ECE 4 domains include: Literacy and numeracy, Physical, Social Emotional Care & Learning (UNICEF 2020). However, a similar process of domain and assessment alignment has not occurred within the national and provincial ECE pedagogy. Moreover, issues of instruction in mother tongue, inclusive education, intersectoral coordination with nutrition and health are all pending concerns that require policy focus by all stakeholders. AKF’s suggestions point towards the significance of mother tongue instruction and incorporation of home languages, values, to

¹ https://www.pass.gov.pk/Detail7fbd0b2e-63a2-4da7-ab04-6a64adff488b
ensure greater conceptual understanding and learning outcomes, retention, equity, and inclusion.

To discuss these gaps and the potential approaches ECE service-providers can take at both the policy level and beyond, this policy consultation session aims to bring together ECE stakeholders and practitioners.

**Thematic Areas for Discussion and Focused Recommendations for NEP 2021:**

- How do we define and delineate the age group of ECCE in the NEP 2021? And how does the terminology/systems align with health, nutrition and protection?
- Given that there are varying age groups for ECE curriculum across provinces, is there a need to unify all approaches and institute either a 1-year or 2-year program?
- What language of instruction would be more suitable in the coming years for ECE schooling? Mother Tongue, Urdu, etc.; what are the implications of MTT?
- The four domains to measure ECE as per SDG 4 targets of SDG 4.2: SDG 4.2.1 should these be made part of the Single National Curriculum ECE and Standards?
- There is a high scope for play-based learning in early years globally but it is absent as a separate approach within national ECE systems. How can it be incorporated?
- What potential steps can policy makers, practitioners, and teachers take to incorporate non-cognitive learning into ECE pedagogy?
- Is inclusive education within ECE a pipe dream or is there space for tangible, effective measures to be taken in this regard?
- How can other aspects of early development such as nutrition and health be seamed together with schooling to provide a more holistic ECE experience?

**Speakers/Panelists:**

- Team representative SNC from the National Curriculum Council
- Dr. Fouzia Khan – Chief Advisor Curriculum and Focal Person ECE- SELD
- Dr. Amna Ansari – World Bank (Pakistan)
- Dr. Shelina Bahmani – Aga Khan University
• Dr Farid Panjwani – Professor and Dean AKUIED
• Khadija Khan — CEO PAFEC
• Erum Barki -UNICEF
• Riaz Ahmed Kamlani – The Citizens Foundation (TCF)
• Teachers Resource Centre (TRC)

Moderator: ITA -ELP Systems Punjab Pakistan