



Early Learning Partnership Phase II: COVID-19 Interim Research 2021

April 2020-March 2021

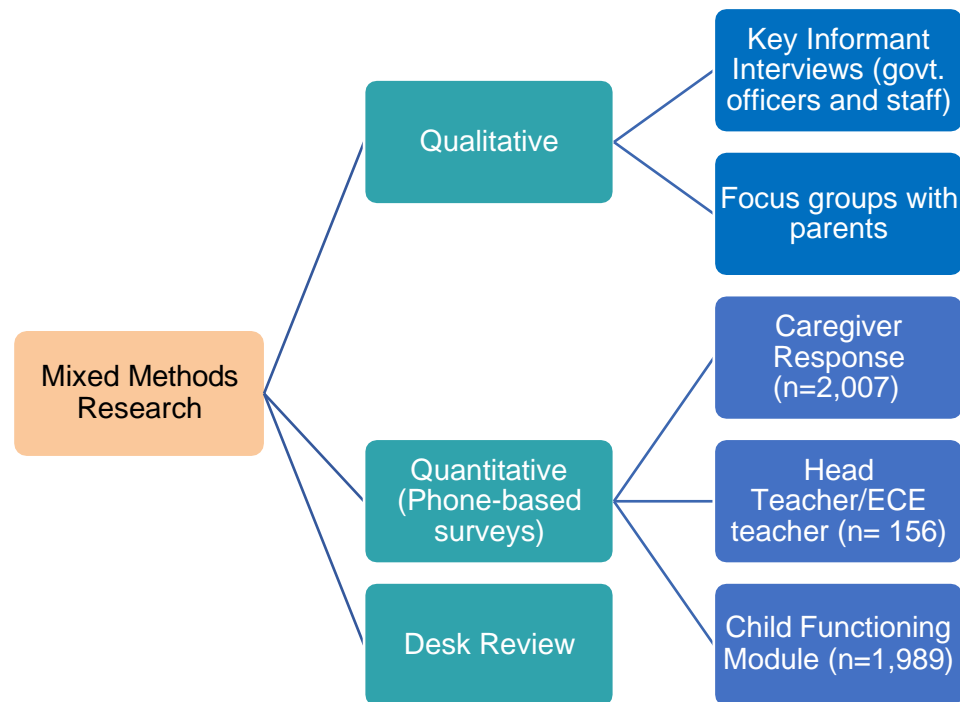
KEY TAKEAWAYS

As part of ITA's work on early childhood education (ECE) and in line with the increased recognition that this subsector has received in recent years, ITA conducted an early years' research study in the first quarter of 2021. As part of the Early Learning Partnership Systems Research Phase II program—funded by World Bank with support from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)—the study explored key thematic questions pertaining to early years with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic response, subsector prioritization, learning at home, ECE staff support, and the eventual return to school for young children.

- 1. Space for Distance Learning:** Limited access to distance learning during the period of lockdown but participation in distance learning via text messages, television, radio, and particularly printed materials was comparatively high. 73% of the children accessed free printed materials during this period and 35% had access to resources on television.
- 2. Positive trend of play-based learning in ECE but negative disciplining at home:** The high prevalence of play-based learning at home with parents, with guidance from teachers, is a major positive outcome particularly due to the increasing recognition that play is gaining within ECE pedagogy worldwide and in Pakistan. More than 85% of the parents engaged with their children in play-based learning activities including storytelling and book reading to keep them stimulated. 69% of the teachers reported taking measures for children's psycho-social wellbeing during the pandemic. However, there is evidence of negative disciplining techniques being practiced at home as 28% of the parents reported using physical punishment for disciplining child and 39% believed in strong punishment for children.
- 3. Professional development and support to teachers:** Findings indicate evidence of limited professional development and training relevant to COVID- 19 and ECE being provided to head teachers and teachers during the pandemic. 47% of the surveyed teachers reported receiving professional development and other forms of support during the school closures. On the salaries/ financial side, an overwhelming majority (97%) reported receiving their salary throughout the lockdown period. Additionally, nearly all the head teachers (96%) had a way to receive updated information with regards to school reopening.
- 4. Response for Children with Special Needs:** Disaggregating the parental engagement by disability status, parents of children with disabilities had engaged relatively lesser in the learning activities with their children with the differences between the two categories ranging between 4% to 5%. Similarly, parents of children without disabilities have spent more resources on their child relative to other children in comparison to parents of children with disabilities (19% vs. 16.8%).
- 5. ECE Response during COVID-19:** The limited prioritization of ECE during the pandemic and the learning losses shown in our findings highlight the need to develop more coherent, entrenched, and formalized ECE-specific strategies at a systems' level that can mitigate the negative impact of emergency situations and ensure high outcomes in other times.

- 6. Learning Outcomes and Losses:** The caregiver-reported learning outcomes of children hint at learning losses incurred during this period. This is also backed by KIIs with teachers and District Education Authorities who pointed out the low transition rate for children belonging to ECE as a result of their academic year being set back.

THE STUDY SETTING



KEY FINDINGS

1. Teacher Support and Professional Development:

As the graph below shows, a sizeable proportion of teachers received professional development and other forms of support during the school closure phase of the pandemic.

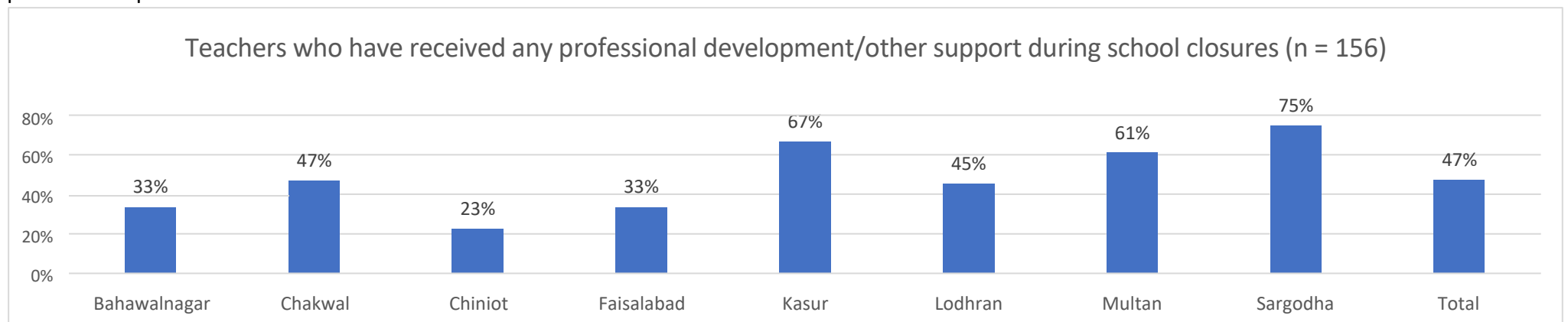


Figure 1 - Teachers who have received any professional development/other support during school closures (Teacher Survey)

2. Experience of Children and Families

Although a majority of sampled teachers reported assigning home learning activities to ECE students during the lockdown period (86%), there was some ambiguity on the uptake of distance learning activities. More than half of the surveyed teachers estimated that less than 50% of the children in their ECE classrooms participated in distance learning activities. Nonetheless, 19% of the teachers reported that over 75% of their students had participated in the distance learning activities. Outside of printed materials provided by schools, the second largest source of free learning material accessed by children was the television, with as many as 35% of the children accessing it. This is positively encouraging and shows the huge impact and potential of these interventions along with providing us with lessons for similar interventions in future.¹

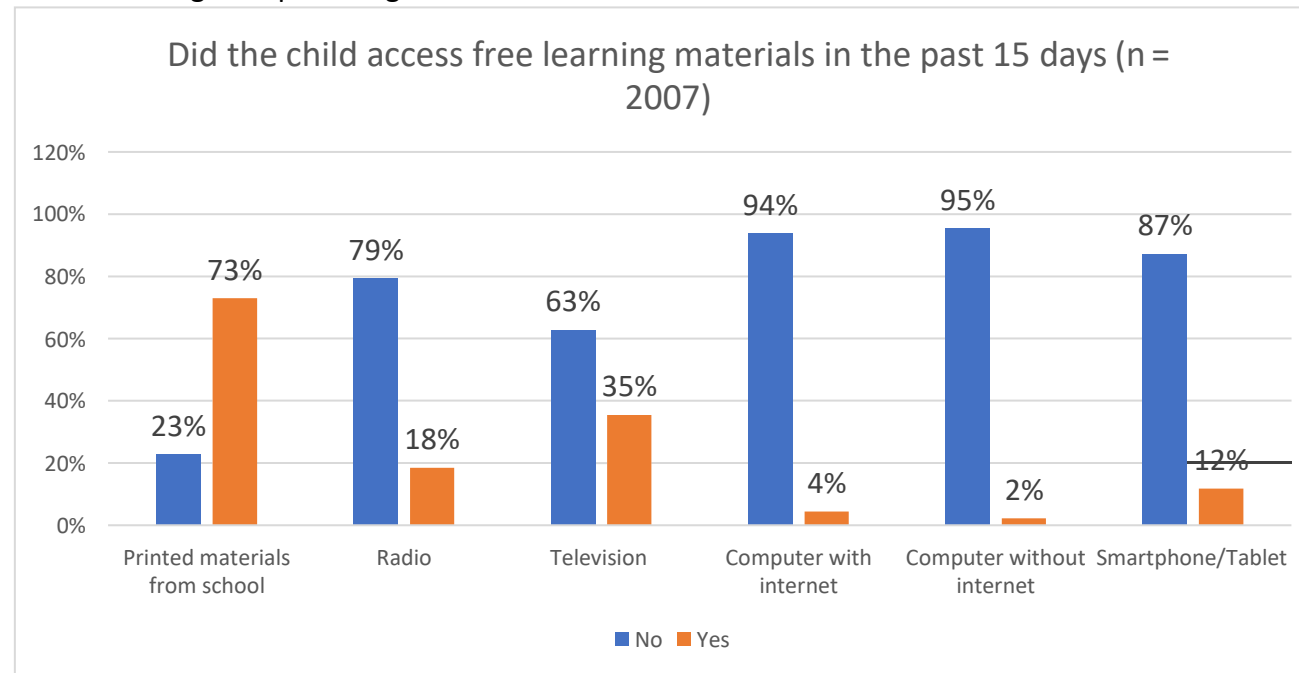


Figure 2 - Children's Access to Free Learning Material (Caregiver Survey)

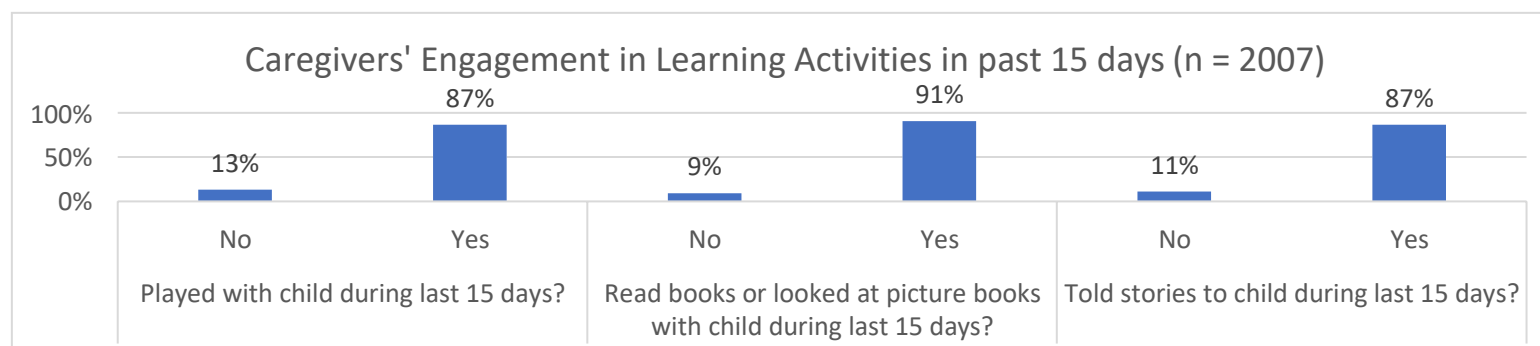


Figure 3 - Caregivers' Engagement in Learning Activities in past 15 days (Caregiver Survey)

¹ It is possible for a child to have accessed more than one options for accessing free learning materials.

3. Learning Outcomes

As part of the Caregiver Survey, the learning outcomes of children as reported by their parents/caregiver were also recorded to acquire a sense of the learning levels of the children after an extended lockdown. Spread across three domains—literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional—the data provides insights into how the learning activities mentioned above had an effect on child’s development and learning.

Within the literacy domain, there are variations in both gender and across various competencies. Compared to the literacy domain, the data for numeracy suggests better learning outcomes.

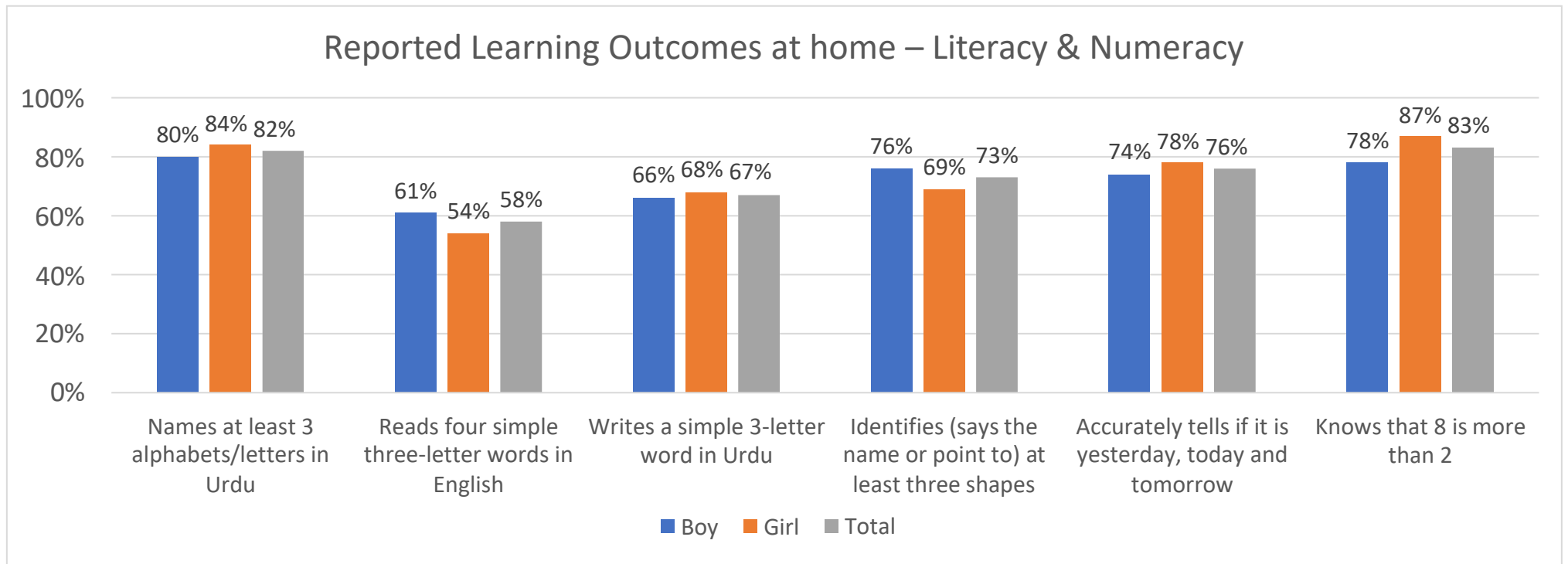


Figure 4- Reported Learning Outcomes at home – Literacy & Numeracy (Caregiver Survey)

Along with literacy and numeracy, the caregiver survey also examined the socio-emotional state of children, as reported by parents/caregivers. As the following table shows, the proportion of children from both genders with a stable socio-emotional state is unexpectedly higher as 79% of the children are reported to adjust easily to transitions and as many as 94% get along with their peers.

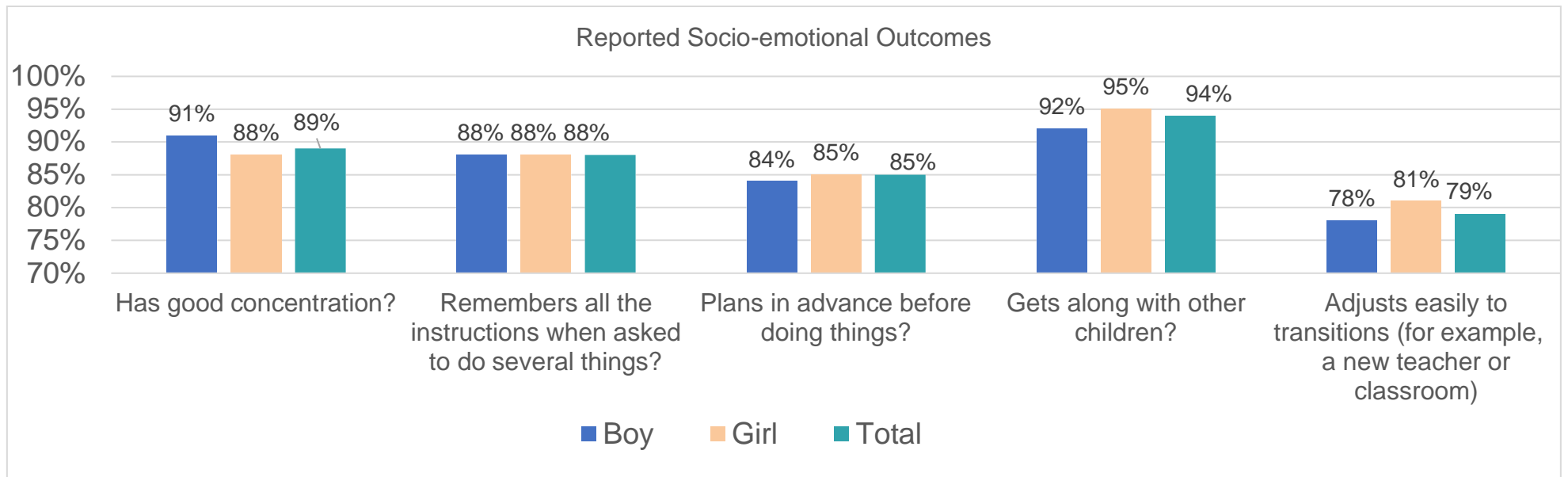


Figure 5 - Reported Socio-emotional Outcomes at home (Caregiver Survey)

4. Child Disciplining

While learning activities have been regular across households, indicating the rise of playful parenting in early years (Figure 3), the data also indicates continuing traditional disciplining norms. This is particularly alarming in the case for physical punishment. The practice is corroborated with another reinforcement question pertaining to the beliefs/norms with regards to child disciplining; 38% of the parents reportedly believe that it is sometimes necessary to physically punish children. There is a clear tension when juxtaposed against the evidence on playful learning activities that reveal just the opposite and optimistic behavior around playful parenting and engagement with children.



Figure 6 – Reported physical punishment (Caregiver Survey)

5. Children with Special Needs

A shortened version of the Child Functioning Module was developed to understand the prevalence of and types of disabilities that children in Punjab experience. This adapted version is based on the overlapping questions in the questionnaires for 2-4 years old and 5-17 years old and covers five functionings including seeing, hearing, walking, communication and learning. As shown below, we find that the disability prevalence amongst the sampled households was estimated at 7.05%.

	Number	Percentage
No Disability	1834	92.95
With Disability	139	7.05

Table 1 - Disability Status

	Number	Percentage
No Functional Difficulty	1817	92.09
Mild Functional Difficulty	17	0.86
Moderate Functional Difficulty	57	2.89
Severe Functional Difficulty	82	4.16

Table 2 - Functional Difficulty Level

We also find significant differences when disaggregating the disability status by gender. There are 8.16% girls in our sample with reported disabilities, compared to 5.77% boys. Disaggregating the parental engagement by disability status, we can clearly observe that, albeit parental engagement being quite high for both categories, parents of children with disabilities had engaged relatively lesser in the learning activities with their children. Moreover, we also find that parents of children with disabilities found it more difficult to be affectionate to their child relative to those with children without disabilities and felt more angry/irritated with their child as compared to parents with children without disabilities.

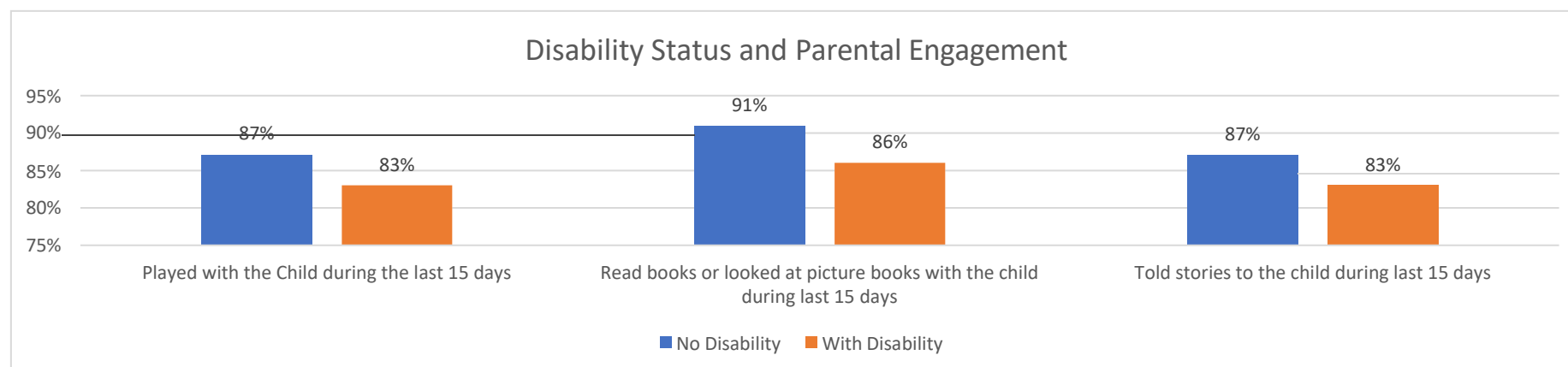


Figure 7 – Disability Status and Parental Engagement (Caregiver Survey)

6. Resources and Financing of the ECE Sub-Sector

On the financial side, qualitative fieldwork highlights that the pandemic did not prompt any major shifts in the overall funding for ECE from the government’s side. Previously, the funding for ECE in the province was less than 5% of the total funding for the education sector².

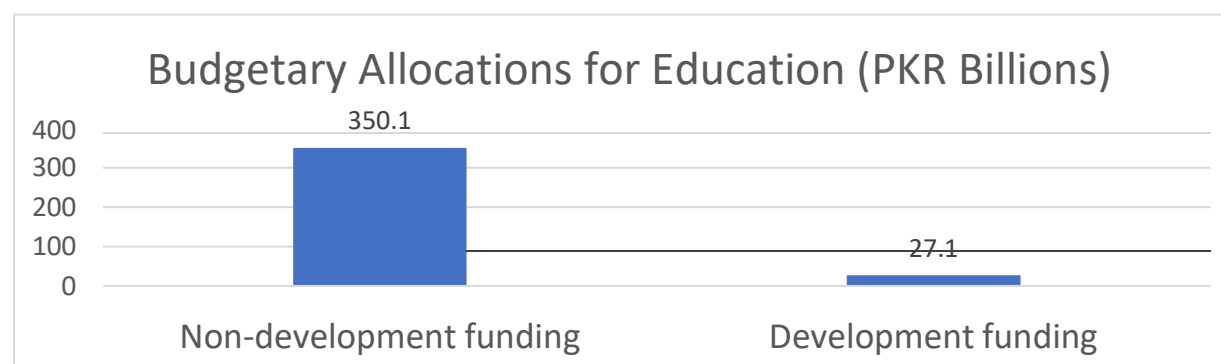


Figure 8 – Budgetary Allocations for Education

Along with government funding, several donor-funded interventions for the ECE sector were introduced as well³. Quantitative data from the study indicates that a majority of the schools in the sampled districts did not face major cash flow problems. As Figure 7 highlights, a smaller percentage of school head teachers hinted at facing cash flow issues during the past 9 months, which coincides with the peak of lockdown.

Breakdown of budget
HCI breakdown

² Planning and Development Department Punjab, 2020

³ Schools had reopened partially at the time that the qualitative fieldwork was conducted.

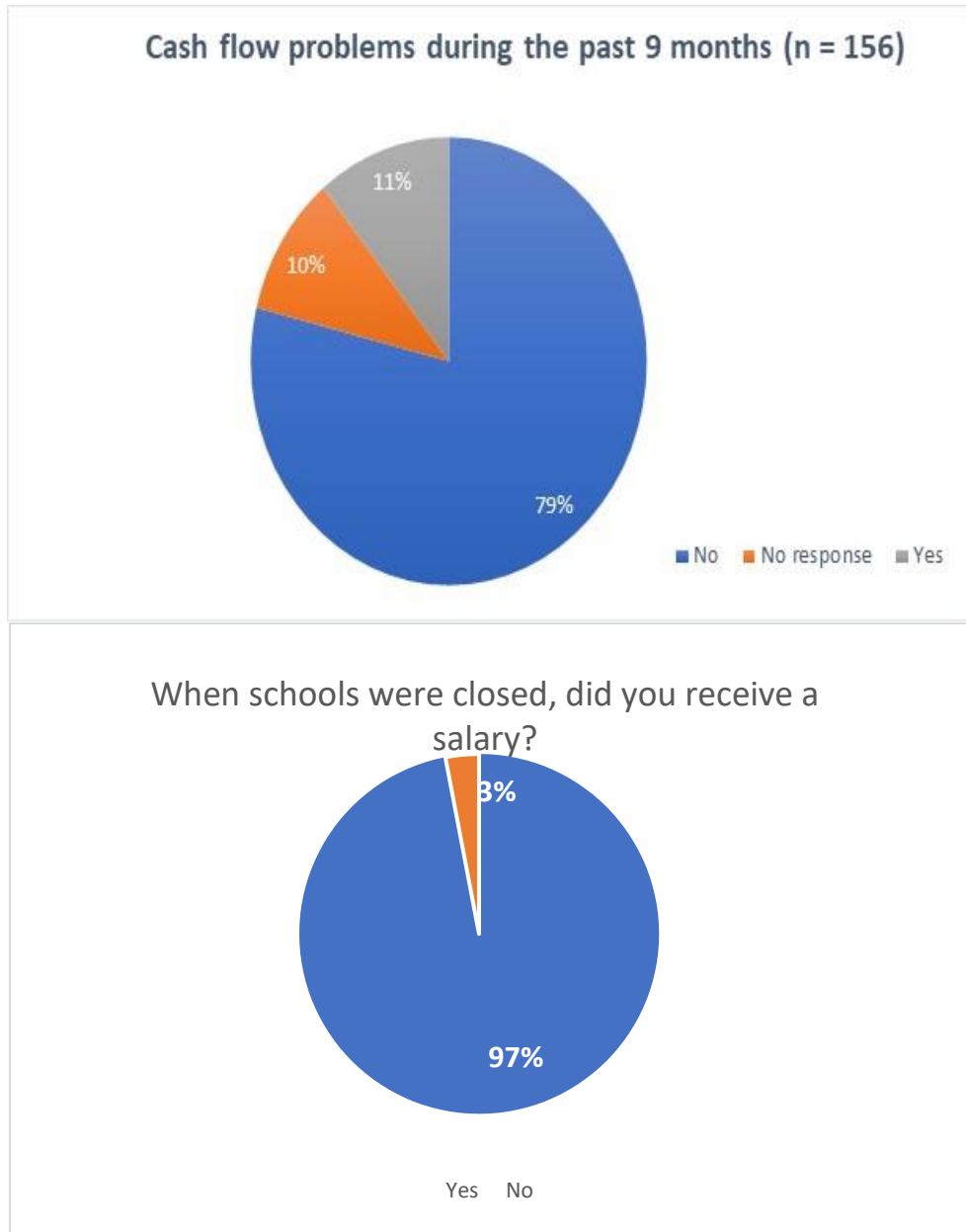


Figure 9 - Financial support for ECE Staff during lockdown

CONCLUSION

The key research questions guiding this research are related to ECE in COVID-19 in terms of **response, prioritization, learning at home, staff support, and eventual return to school**. The study deployed a mixed-methods approach with quantitative data complemented by qualitative key informant interviews and focus-group discussions spread across 8 districts, 2000+ households, and 150+ schools in Punjab. Our findings provide some key insights into the early learning situation in Punjab.

- *Positive trend of play-based learning in ECE:* There is inherent potential in play-based learning. The high prevalence of play-based learning at home with parents, with guidance from teachers, is a major positive outcome particularly due to the increasing recognition that play is gaining within ECE pedagogy worldwide. There is thus an opportunity to engage parents further to ensure that the learning environments for children are well-developed at both the class-room and household level.
- *Potential space for distance learning:* Our findings shows that the scope for distance learning in ECE is there. It is abundantly clear that various government and non-government actors have taken various steps to incorporate early learning into the larger distance learning response strategy and there is evidence of household appetite for the same, thus fulfilling a basic necessary condition on both the supply-side and the demand-side. However, demand-side issues—such as access to the internet or television—and supply-side issues such as budgetary and implementation constraints continue to affect distance-learning in ECE.
- *ECE Prioritization in emergency response settings:* While the government actors have over the past few years worked well to transform ECE up to modern standards, our findings show that there are still some major milestones to achieve. The limited prioritization of ECE during the pandemic and the learning losses shown in our findings highlight the need to develop more coherent, entrenched, and formalized ECE-specific strategies at a systems' level that can mitigate the negative impact of emergency situations and ensure high outcomes in other times.
- *Improved Assessment Measures:* ECE in Punjab has come a long way in terms of formalization and establishment of classrooms, monitoring, and quality control. However, as noted by KIIs, there is potential to develop further processes and undertake reform actions in data collection,

monitoring, child assessment, and parental engagement to ensure a continuous feedback loop that would pass through from the school level to the highest policy platforms—including SDG 4.2 and SDG 4.1.1 (a lower primary learning) reporting—and vice-versa. This will eventually result in better learning outcomes

- *Progressive ECE financing:* The funding and budgetary allocations for ECE would need progressive and mainstream commitments. There is a need to provide increased recurrent and development budgets which would ensure system wide improvements in ECE. These include an effective recruitment of a dedicated ECE cadre and professional development of ECE staff (teachers, head teachers, assistant teachers/caregivers and monitors), establishment and upgradation of ECE classrooms, investment in play-based learning with parental engagement, capacity for making localized learning materials and a more robust planning and implementation budgetary cycle.