

THE STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

A NATIONAL LANDSCAPE STUDY

Structures, Disparities, and Pathways Forward



**The State of
Early Childhood Care and Education
in Pakistan:
*A National Landscape Study***

Structures, Disparities, and Pathways Forward

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Study Information

This study was a collaboration between Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) and Idara-e-Taleem o Aagahi (ITA). The members of the study team from the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) included Dr. Shahid Soroya, Dr. Muhammad Zaigham Qadeer, Ms. Syeda Samana Ali, Mr. Sohail Ajmal, Ms. Misbah Azhar, Mr. Haider Ali, Mr. Adeel Ishaq, Mr Muhammad Bilal Kakli and Mr Zubair Farooq Paracha. The members of the study team from Idara-e-Taleem o Aagahi included Ms. Baela Raza Jamil, Mr. Adil Ashraf and Sahar Saeed, and special review by Dr. Shelina Bahmani of AKU.

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Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Landscape Report (2025) establishes that zero to eight years is the most critical window for human capital investment, with **90 percent of brain development complete by age five**. Pakistan's current strategic focus is on Early Childhood Education (ECE) for the 3–5 age group, aligned with **SDG Target 4.2**, ensuring all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030. Provinces vary in their official ECE duration, most offer one year, Sindh offers two, but most provinces have de facto two years of provision with little planning and dedicated resourcing.

Pakistan's ECE system serves **9.6 million children nationally (public and private schools)**, more than half the size of the entire Middle school stage and over double the size of High school, yet it remains almost structurally invisible within the country's own education administration: **no province maintains a dedicated ECE/Pre-primary budget**. This gap begins at the level of basic classification. Pre-Primary is not recognized as a distinct institution type in national education statistics, embedded within Primary schools rather than a sub-sector with dedicated facilities with its own clear administrative and planning identity.

Access to ECE varies considerably across the country, with facility and workforce provision showing the widest gaps. Nationally, only **32 percent of public primary schools** report having ECE facilities including teaching kits, and **just 13 percent** have a trained ECE teacher. Sindh shows the greatest room for strengthening on both measures, at **9 percent** and **2 percent** respectively, a figure corroborated by two independent government data systems (ASC and NEMIS). Gross enrolment also substantially exceeds age-appropriate participation at Pre-Primary in every region, most notably in ICT (**131 percent GER against 87 percent age-4 participation**), suggesting many children in ECE classrooms are older than the intended age band, an area meriting closer attention as provinces refine enrollment practices. National gender patterns reveal **51.9 percent of enrolled children are male against 48.1 percent female**, with ICT as one region where female enrollment exceeds male.

Provincial performance varies by indicator rather than following a single, consistent pattern. Punjab and, in most cases, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) show the strongest facility and enrollment figures, while Sindh and Balochistan have the greatest opportunity for improvement across most measures. Teacher training is a notable exception to this pattern: KP's rural trained-teacher rate sits close to the national low, underscoring that provincial strengths and gaps do not always move together, and that targeted, indicator-specific investment will likely be more effective than a uniform provincial strategy.

Financing constraints compound these gaps rather than sitting apart from them. National education expenditure as a share of GDP fell from **1.9 percent in 2019-20 to 0.8 percent by 2024-25**, less than half its earlier level. Education's share of the total government budget has fallen in most regions over the same period, further jeopardizing dedicated support to pre-primary education.

The chronic lack of ECE teachers, professional development, classrooms, unclear guidance on mother-tongue instruction, lack of teaching learning materials and age-appropriate furniture undermine the play-based, holistic pedagogy mandated by the National Curriculum of Pakistan (NCP) 2020, frequently forcing teachers back on rote methods. **Early Childhood Education remains largely absent**

from Pakistan's emergency response planning, even as climate-related emergencies grow more frequent, representing a clear opportunity to extend existing Education in Emergencies frameworks to include the youngest learners. There is an urgent need to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into ECE programming and pedagogy more consistently. Data and assessment gaps remain especially severe in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan, leaving early years provision weak and fragmented in national and provincial planning, implementation, and monitoring systems.

To address these barriers, the report recommends immediate reforms to grant pre-school education unambiguous formal and legal status as an essential sub-sector within ALL five Right to Education (RTE) and Article 25-A laws and rules of business. It calls for the establishment of separate, ring-fenced budget lines at both provincial and federal levels, covering ECE workforce, training, infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, and the data and evidence systems needed to track all ECE providers, not public schools alone. The report advocates for formal professionalization of the ECE workforce through a dedicated teacher cadre with specialized qualifications, and for rationalizing ECCE/ECE curricula around literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning anchored in clear Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) mapped to early learning standards. Finally, it emphasizes multi-sectoral coordination across education, health, nutrition, care and social protection to support a holistic, nurturing-care approach for all young learners, particularly those in fragile and under-resourced contexts.

National ECD Policy Framework 2025

The report is cognizant of the National Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy Framework 2025, finalized by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives and UNICEF, to address the critical developmental, nutritional, and health gaps for children from conception up to eight years of age through a multi-sectoral strategy, with trained workforces and accredited curricula for young children.

Four pillars of the multi-sectoral strategy:

Health & Nutrition

Responsive Caregiving

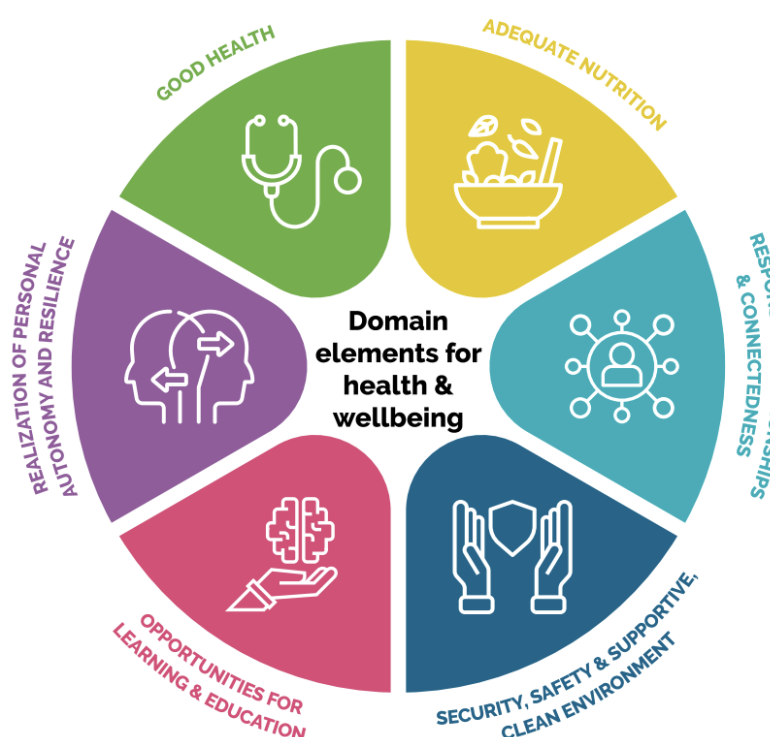
Safety & Social Protection

Early Learning

Introduction and Background

Early childhood is a critical phase for a child's physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development; 90 percent of brain development is completed by 5 years of age. Investing in 0-5 and preferably 0-8 years yields significant long-term benefits at the individual, family and societal level anchored in the principles of neuroscience and care. The first 1000 days are critical from conception to age 2 for nurturing care of both mother and child, reaching milestones of healthy birth, nourishment and protection including birth registration, immunization, stimulation at home. The next three years 2+ to 5 comprise the phase for extending the nurturing care environment to support the child's continued need for a) good health, b) adequate nourishment, c) responsive care giving, d) opportunities for early learning and e) security and protection, as a five-dimensional holistic approach. Age 6-8 is the phase of transitioning from pre-school to grade 1 and lower primary schooling sustaining early years foundational learning and care practices. In many countries 0-8 years is considered as the critical spectrum for a child's strong foundations as Early Childhood Development (ECD) or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The urgency of adopting a multi-dimensional approach from 0-8 years is encapsulated in the [nurturing care framework \(NCF\)](#) guideline by WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank (2018) for children to survive, thrive and transform.

Figure 1: Nurturing Care Framework



Source: Nurturing Care Framework - WHO, UNICEF and World Bank

Pakistan is facing systemic challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality with equity for the youngest learners. The prevalent model for early years support is of pre-school or Early Childhood

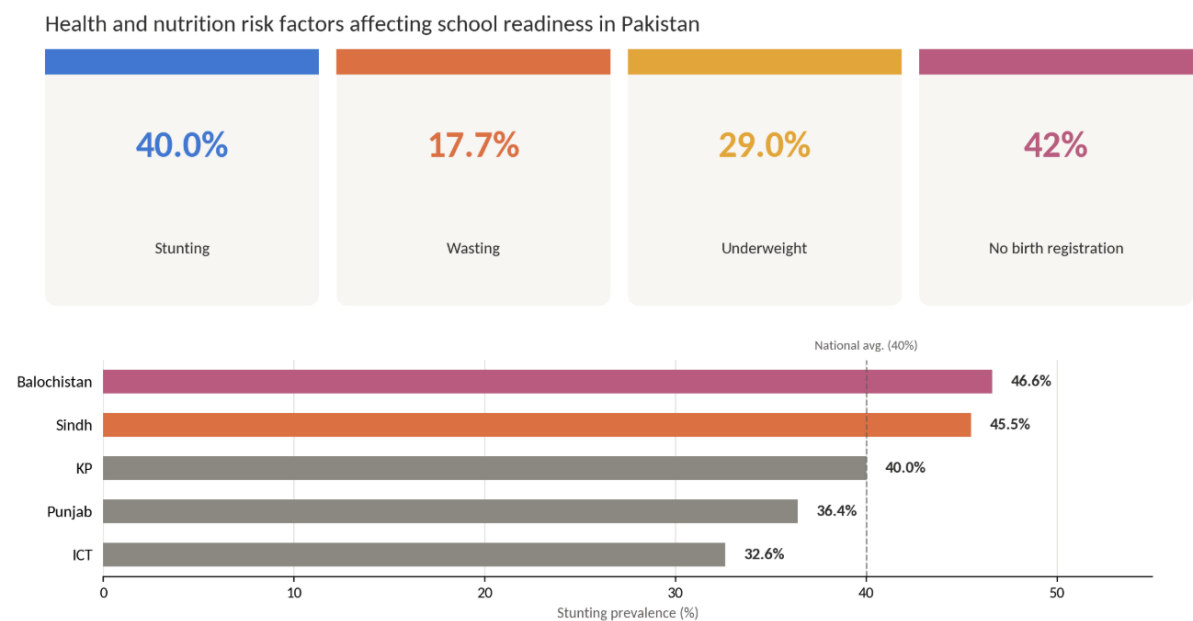
Education (ECE) catering to the age group 3-5 years providing 1-2 or even 3 years of education across public and private schools. As a signatory to SDGs2030 and SDG 4 for education, Pakistan is committed to targets of SDG 4.2 for pre-school.

SDG Target 4.2

“ 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.

Health and nutrition indicators point to a compromised foundation for school readiness in Pakistan. Nationally, 40.0 percent of children under five are stunted, 17.7 percent are wasted, and 29.0 percent are underweight, alongside a 42 percent rate of missing birth registration, a documentation gap that itself complicates enrollment and access to services. These risks are not evenly distributed across regions: Balochistan and Sindh report the highest stunting prevalence, at 46.6 and 45.5 percent respectively, well above the national average, while ICT is the clear outlier in the other direction at 32.6 percent. Children in Balochistan and Sindh enter the ECE-eligible age range with the weakest developmental starting point of any region in the country (National Nutrition Survey, 2018, as reported in NCRC & UNICEF, 2024).

Figure 2. Risks to School readiness in Pakistan



Source: NCRC & UNICEF (2024), Tables 18-19, citing National Nutrition Survey (NNS) 2018.

These compelling statistics highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions, especially for the vulnerable population groups across rural, urban, and urban slums. It also illustrates how health, nutrition, education, and care are intertwined for shaping the early years of learning. These challenges, along with rising poverty impacting 44.7% of the population at 4.20 \$ per day (WB 2025),

recurring climate change emergencies, and displacement/migration, undermine the family's capacity for health, food security, care, children's access to schools, and readiness to learn.

The plight of children is encapsulated as a polycrisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed, education services were disrupted, leading to enrolment and foundational learning losses, especially for early years and from marginalized groups impacted by poverty, geography, and gender. Children in pre-school are impacted most by pandemics and emergencies, being the first to be withdrawn and last to re-enter schools. According to *Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Pakistan (ASER 2021)*, learning levels declined across grades, particularly in basic reading and arithmetic, with younger children and those from poorer households most affected¹.

Early childhood education (ECE) has received progressively increased recognition, especially since 2015. It has been a popular area of research both nationally and globally. Pakistan was part of the five-country Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Systems Research Phase I and II managed by the World Bank with funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The diagnostic study undertaken by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) with the World Bank (2018-2022) explored key thematic questions pertaining to early years systems in Pakistan (Punjab and Sindh), focusing on sub-sector prioritization, learning, language and care practices at the school/classroom, at home, the state of ECE workforce and support, COVID-19 impact and the eventual return to school for young children. *Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Phase II: COVID-19 Interim Research 2021* (Policy Brief & Journal of Research in Childhood Education 2024 vol. 38). There have been recent studies by Unicef (2023), World Bank (2024), Raikes A. et. al (2026) and GEM Report (2026) on ECCE arguing for policy, laws, system, resource and data coherence for progressive ECE/ECCE to address OOSC, foundational learning, assessment regimes and evidence.

Pakistan is a signatory to early years in global commitments, including

- Education For All (EFA) in Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1990
- SDG 4 (4.2- 4.2.1 and 4.2.2) 2015
- World Congress on Early Care and Education (Tashkent Declaration, 2022).

The commitment has been reflected progressively since the 1998 and 2009 National Education Policies (NEPs); Education Sector Reforms (ESR) Action Plan 2001-2004/5; Education For All Plan of Action (2001-2015) and successive Education Sector Plans (ESPs) of all provinces. There are specific ECE Provincial Policies (Sindh 2015, Punjab 2017, and KP in process) and the ECE Framework in Balochistan. More recently, all provinces and ICT have finalized foundational learning (FL) policies for literacy, numeracy and social-emotional learning (SEL). Some policies integrate ECE with FL; the Sindh ECCE and Foundational Learning Policy 2024, whilst Punjab and National FL policies implicitly adopt a unified approach integrating ECE in their targets and student learning outcomes for sustained Foundational Learning. The investment in Early Childhood Education (3-5 years) and Early Childhood Development (ECD) is crucial for building strong foundations adhering to the five-dimensional Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), and sustained foundational learning with SEL.

¹ http://aserpakistan.org/document/aser/2021/reports/national/ASER_report_National_2021.pdf

Pakistan's education policies, policy frameworks, plans are fully aligned with the **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”**

SDG Target 4.2: “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”. The two Global Indicators for attaining SDG 4.2 are,

4.2.1: Proportion of children aged 24-59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing, by sex

4.2.2: Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary school entry)

SDG 4.2 indicators specifically focus on providing access to quality, holistic early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030. However, disparities in the incidence and distribution of Early Childhood Education (ECE) services across Pakistan's regions especially the lagging districts, the poorest, poor, migrating, displaced groups, and those affected by recurrent emergencies of climate change, underscore the need for concerted efforts to overcome barriers to access, quality, care and participation within diverse contexts, both across and within provinces.

Purpose of the ECE Landscape Study

This ECE Landscape Study of Pakistan aims to show why early childhood education needs its own dedicated space. Right now, ECE/ECCE is not treated as a distinct sub-sector in systematic data collection, planning, workforce recruitment, training, financing, and implementation. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) already recognizes it as a sub-sector. This report argues that formal recognition needs to be backed at national, provincial, and local levels to ensure timely access, quality, equity, inclusion, and governance for early childhood education in Pakistan.

ISCED is in use globally under the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). It is adhered to by the Government of Pakistan and its Ministry/Departments of Education. ECE is classified as the ISCED Level “0”, whilst Primary is ISCED Level 1 and so on. However, in Pakistan there is lack of clarity on this classification and system integration.

Currently, the practice of ECE reporting by the governments is often subsumed under Primary and Elementary levels, although data is collected by each class/grade. The unclear reporting keeps key indicators for the sub-sector opaque, hindering focused, holistic planning and financing for our youngest children in Pakistan during volatile times and delivering education as a fundamental right.

Under the five Right to Education (RTE) laws (2012-2017) in the federation for implementing Article 25-a as a fundamental right of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for all children aged 5-16 years, only ICT, Sindh and Punjab clearly include ECE as a distinct age group backed by rules of business and policies, whilst KP and Balochistan RTE laws have not included early years. This discrepancy in the federation undermines the status and provision for ECE as a fundamental right.

The ambition of this Landscape Report is therefore to lay the foundation for ECE/ECCE as clear Level 0 under ICSED sub-sector that demands distinct planning and reporting to ensure that our youngest children have strong early foundations for sustained learning and thriving.

The ECE Landscape Report has been compiled using a mixed methods approach. Primary and secondary data have been collected from the Annual School Census (ASC) of each province by the respective School Education and Elementary & Secondary Departments of Education, and the Pakistan Education Statistics (PES) reports published by PIE. The data examines trends in formal ECE provision across Pakistan, focusing on key indicators such as the availability of ECE classrooms, trained teachers, learning materials, and enrollment patterns. Data is complemented by focused group discussions (FGDs) held across all provinces, ICT, Gilgit Baltistan (GB), and Azad Jammu and Kashmir jointly by PIE and ITA teams (May-July 2025).

Scope of the Study

The Early Years Landscape study undertaken by the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE), mandated to produce high-quality documents on education, data, and assessments, explores the prevalence, trends, and challenges related to ECCE and ECE in the country. Its focus will be on the following key suggested areas to be revisited for coherence and defining trends to inform the future system support and strengthening for an anchor sector in foundational human development in Pakistan.

Objectives

The objective of the research is following:

Objective 1: To explore the incidence and prevalence of ECCE and ECE across Pakistan's diverse regions, highlighting disparities in access, especially in emergency and refugee contexts

This entails unpacking terms and practices from the lens of ECD, ECCE, and ECE in Pakistan; mapping programs from this perspective at the policy, legal/entitlement sector plans, and programs on ground across departments.

Objective 2: To examine pedagogy, teaching methods and assessment/monitoring practices in classroom environments, workforce preparedness, and access to enabling resources within formal and non-formal ECD programs, including those in fragile communities.

What are the current practices in measuring progress in Early Years programs; assessment and monitoring tools- what do they measure and how do they impact the quality of delivery and support? This will also include the availability of ECE-trained teachers in schools.

Objective 3: To evaluate multi-sectoral approaches, curriculum and policies integration for ECD/ECCE/ECE in Pakistan.

The study will explore existing trends and practices in holistic multi-sectoral approaches in Pakistan, assessing how sectors such as health, nutrition, and social protection intersect with education. This includes examples of programs with Nutrition, Health, Social Protection, Care and Preparedness support together with education/learning stimulation.

The research will highlight the alignment and effectiveness of national and provincial education sector plans, policies, and curriculum, emphasizing inclusivity for children with disabilities and those in fragile contexts affected by climate change and emergencies.

Objective 4: To identify Socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers to ECCE/ECE, with a focus on how these challenges impact the children and their families, especially in fragile and marginalized communities.

Methodology

This is based on primary and secondary data analysis, through which trends and practices are assessed in ECE school settings in Pakistan. The study has used the existing data, policy documents, and reports present and accessible, in which the sources of data include: MoFE&PT/FDE records, Provincial Education Plans, School census data (for infrastructure, teacher training, and enrollment), PIE research studies and donor supported research studies, etc.

This desk review has involved exploring and identifying the existing data sources to explore the study indicators, which are: ECE enrollment patterns, ECE learning materials, ECE room/infrastructure availability, and ECE trained teachers. For the primary data collection, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in seven regions of Pakistan, including: Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Punjab (Lahore), Balochistan (Quetta), Sindh (Karachi), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP, Abbottabad), Azad & Jammu Kashmir (AJK, Muzaffarabad), and Gilgit Baltistan (GB). In these FGDs, the government representatives, teachers, and education officers were invited to share the issues and experiences of ECCE/ECE in the provinces/ regions.

A mixed-method approach is used in this study with both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The data from Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) is analyzed qualitatively, and the data from the Annual School Census is analyzed quantitatively. This approach has explored the identification of gaps and challenges in the current ECE implementation framework and comparative statistics to analyze enrolment patterns and resource distribution. The study will also explore the regional disparities present in ECE across Pakistan.



The sampling framework for this study will focus on the following criteria:

Table 1. Sampling Framework

Criteria	Description
Regions	Stratified sampling to ensure regional classifications in representative - Provinces - Districts - Rural/Urban
Schools	Government Schools with ECE indicators
Indicators	Following ECE indicators will be focused on - Room/Infrastructure Availability - Trained Teachers - Learning Materials Enrollment Patterns
Inclusion criteria	Accessible data sources which can be verified datasets and reports that focus on the four key indicators

This table provides the methodological architecture for this national landscape study of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Pakistan. It systematically details the research design, moving from the core research objectives to the specific mechanisms of inquiry and data synthesis. The framework is anchored in a pragmatic, mixed-methods approach, designed to generate a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis of the ECCE ecosystem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The objective and corresponding research questions (RQs) guide the investigation toward diagnosing systemic strengths and critical gaps in access, equity, and quality.

To answer these RQs, the methodology triangulates data from diverse sources, including policy documents, national/provincial datasets, and implementation reports, ensuring analytical robustness. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence enables a nuanced examination of the disjuncture between policy intent, as seen in frameworks like the National Education Policy 2024, provincial ECE policies, and on-ground realities documented in analyses by Samuel Hall/UNICEF (2023) and the World Bank. Consequently, the table serves as a foundational blueprint, outlining the analytical pathway from raw data to evidence-based conclusions that can inform strategic intervention and policy reform.

Table 2. The Study's Research Framework

Objective	Research Question	Methodology	Sources	Approach	Analysis
To explore the incidence and prevalence of ECD, ECCE and ECE across Pakistan's diverse regions, highlighting disparities in access, also in fragile communities	What is the regional distribution of ECE rooms and materials	Desk Review	Government Datasets, Policy Documents	Secondary Data Review	Descriptive Statistics
To examine teaching methods and assessment/monitoring practices in classroom environments, workforce preparedness, access to enabling resources within formal and non-formal ECD programs, including those fragile communities	How are the trained teachers distributed and utilized in ECE? What is the classroom environment of assessments/monitoring	Desk Review, Secondary Data collection	Teacher Training records, ECE data	Document Analysis	Comparative and Trend Analysis
To evaluate the multi-sectoral approaches, curriculum and policies integration for ECE/ECD/ECCE in Pakistan.	Are there enough learning materials distributed? What are the policies for ECE/ECD/ECCE learning approaches?	Desk Review	Policy Documents, Datasets on resource availability	Document Analysis	Comparative Analysis
To identify Socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers to ECCE, with a focus on how these challenges impact the most marginalized children and their families.	What are the disparities present in ECE enrollment by region and gender? What are the ECE financing disparities across regions? Are there any socio-protection and health programs supporting ECE?	Secondary Data Collection	Enrollment records, Budget Allocations, Donor Funding reports, Social protection reports, Nutrition programs data	Descriptive Data Analysis and qualitative analysis for social protection and health data.	Comparative Analysis, Trend Analysis for budget thematic analysis for social protection and nutrition data

Review of the Related Literature



1. ECD, ECCE and ECE: Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

Early childhood development (ECD), Early childhood care and education (ECCE) and Early childhood education (ECE) are related concepts increasingly unified under holistic, development-focused frameworks. Historically, definitions varied: ECD emphasizes comprehensive development across health, nutrition, and responsive caregiving from 0-3 or 0-8 years, ECCE is often referred to a combination of care and early learning services and readiness for young children, while ECE focused on instructional settings preparing children for primary school or grade 1. Recent international guidance, particularly the Nurturing Care Framework, recommends treating these principles as complementary components of an integrated early childhood agenda, emphasizing that cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development with parental/caregiver responsive care and protection are interdependent and best supported through coordinated multi-sectoral action (World Health Organization, UNICEF, & World Bank Group, 2018).

This conceptual shift reorients policy and program design from siloed inputs to child-centered outcomes. The Nurturing Care Framework identifies five core elements—health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning, and safety/protection—delivered through coordinated systems (WHO et al., 2018). Implementation guidance stresses operational clarity: defining age ranges, delivery platforms (home-based, community, clinics, pre-primary centers), and the integration of curricula and caregiver programs. National mapping exercises in Pakistan show that adopting a nurturing-care lens is a reform agenda for ECCE/ECE definitions, aiming for multisectoral objectives and ambitions, through joint sectoral monitoring across education and health/nutrition and social protection indicators (UNICEF Pakistan, 2022).

Programmatically, a unified framework broadens accountability beyond education ministries, extends measurement beyond academic readiness to include socio-emotional development and health, nutrition, social protection and demands cross-disciplinary workforce development and support, ensuring practitioners possess skills in responsive caregiving, stimulation, and pedagogy (UNICEF Pakistan, 2022; WHO et al., 2018). Empirical studies show multi-component interventions (combining stimulation with nutritional or health inputs) deliver greater gains than single-component programs (Khan et al., 2023). Countries adopting integrated definitions are also better positioned to design pooled financing or joint service delivery models reaching vulnerable populations.

In summary, harmonizing ECD, ECCE and ECE into a child-development-centered framework promotes multisectoral policy coherence, broadens monitoring to capture holistic outcomes, and supports integrated service delivery models shown to be more effective than siloed approaches (WHO et al., 2018; UNICEF Pakistan, 2022; Khan et al., 2023).

2. International and National ECE Frameworks

Over the last decade, international frameworks have shaped national ECE policy and programming. The Nurturing Care Framework advocates cross-sectoral strategies and integrated monitoring. Implementation guidance emphasizes adaptation to local governance, delivery platforms, and optimized financing options (WHO, 2023).

National adaptations vary by governance capacity. In Pakistan, provincial ECCE/FLN policies, National Education Policy Framework (2024) and national ECD mapping exercises reflect alignment with nurturing-care principles (Sindh Education & Literacy Department, 2024; UNICEF Pakistan, 2022).

Sindh's ECCE & FLN Policy (2024) integrates ECCE and foundational learning with caregiving elements, establishes teacher preparation standards, and outlines cross-sector referral pathways. These examples demonstrate how international frameworks inform national curricula, standards, and multisector coordination as intentional ambitions for our children.

Implementation experiences highlight both promise and gaps. Countries translating international frameworks effectively establish coordination mechanisms, invest in workforce development, and prioritize monitoring systems capturing child developmental indicators. Common obstacles include unclear ministry mandates, fragmented financing, and limited sub-national capacity (UNICEF Pakistan, 2022; WHO, 2023). Frameworks serve not only as normative guidance but also as catalytic tools, mobilizing funding, technical assistance, and political attention, reinforced by global agendas such as the SDGs and UNESCO foundational learning initiatives.

3. Historical Context, Policy, and Evolution of ECCE/ECE in Pakistan

ECE in Pakistan has traditionally been carried out informally in *katchi* classrooms and available spaces; *katchi* was formally recognized in the 1998-2010 National Education Policy. ECE was included as one of three priority areas selected by Pakistan for its 15-year National Plan of Action (2001-2015) to achieve Education for All goals. The first National Curriculum for ECE was developed in 2002, and upgraded in 2006, followed by the National Education Policy 2009, which included a dedicated section on ECE and the National Education Policy 2017 (draft). ECE has a comprehensive, albeit overloaded standing under the Single National Curriculum/ National Curriculum of Pakistan (2020) (Samuel Hall, 2023).

ECE in Pakistan has been evolving from informal to formal *katchi/awal-adna/nursery/prep* classes to donor-supported, structured early learning programs. Global initiatives such as Education for All, UNICEF, WB, Global Partnership of Education (GPE) catalyzed activity and play-based learning, teacher training, mother tongue supported pedagogies, and classroom improvements (Khan, 2019). Often ECE, *katchi*, prep, nursery are found as a combination in primary/primary sections of government schools to accommodate parental demand for early enrolment ensuring grade one readiness.



Table 3. Types of Pre-Primary provision

Pakistan's three-tier model of pre-primary provision

Provision tier	Dedicated classroom	Trained teacher	Age-appropriate materials	Dedicated budget line
Katchi Multi-grade, shared space	✗	✗	✗	✗*
Improved Katchi Small-scale, donor-supported	✓	✓	✓	✗*
ECE (proper) Formal designation	✓	✓	✓	✗

No budget line is stated for ECE per Samuel Hall (2023); Katchi and Improved Katchi are inferred from their described implementation model*

** Neither tier has a distinct administrative identity or government budget mechanism per the source description*

Source: Adapted from Samuel Hall (2023)

Provincial delivery of pre-primary education in Pakistan can be understood through a three-tier model. Katchi/ECE classes represent the baseline: multi-grade, shared spaces with materials and teacher time split across other grades, typically rote learning. Improved Katchi/ECE adds a dedicated classroom, a trained teacher, and age-appropriate materials, but remains limited to small-scale projects supported by development partners rather than being systematized. A dedicated ECE class matches an upgraded classroom, trained teacher seconded and often on rotation from primary grades, and interactive materials, but critically, even at this top tier, no dedicated ECE budget line exists (Samuel Hall, 2023). This framework is useful for interpreting the study's own findings: much of what FGD participants across provinces describe as "ECE" is functionally still Katchi or Improved Katchi by this classification, carrying the name and the space without the resourcing that would make it ECE in substance.

In 2010, following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education including ECE was fully devolved as a provincial responsibility. Since then, provinces have engaged with varying levels of ECE policy and implementation. Sindh introduced Pakistan's first Early Childhood Education Policy in 2015, focused on activity-based learning, classroom environments, and teacher training. Punjab followed with its own Early Childhood Education Policy in 2017, focused on classroom upgrades, teacher and ECE assistant deployment (paid through non-salary budgets with SMCs), and parental engagement. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has implemented ECE classrooms in thousands of schools mainly through donor support; its ECCE policy remains in draft. Balochistan has an ECE Policy Framework and a long tradition of child-friendly ECE classrooms, but with little support from mainstream budgets. Gilgit-Baltistan has actively adopted community-based ECCE models to reach remote populations.

At the national level, several key policy documents guide ECD/ECCE/ECE: the National Education Policy 2009, the National Plan of Action 2001-2015, the National Education Policy 2017(draft), the Single National Curriculum/NCP (2020), and the Pakistan National Education Policy Framework (2024) setting standards across developmental domains including socio-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development for children aged 3-5, aligned with global frameworks. The National Education Policy

(2017-2025, draft) places early childhood education as a priority area and calls for universal pre-primary coverage. The National Education Policy Framework (2024) calls for a minimum of one year of pre-primary (SDG 4.1.2 indicator) whilst the Pakistan National ECD Policy Framework (2025) by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (MoPD&SI) with UNICEF introduces a multi-sectoral strategy integrating education, health, nutrition, WASH, care and child protection into one model. According to UNESCO (2022), Pakistan is one of the few South Asian countries with a national framework that explicitly links ECD to cross-sectoral coordination that needs equity weighted resource allocation models with financing formulas explicitly prioritizing high-burden districts and marginalized populations (GEM Report 2026). Scaling up public-private partnerships and community-based delivery models are critical too.

Recent policy roadmap documents and initiatives (Sindh/Punjab) push for a lifecycle approach and multi-sectoral platforms linking education, health, nutrition, care, inclusion and protection. Parenting and early stimulation programs are expanding, especially in rural areas (Yousafzai et al., 2018).

Government-led initiatives include ECE classroom establishment, recruitment of ECE teachers (Sindh), provision of learning materials, and development of teacher guides and social emotional learning materials (KP/Punjab-ILMpact). The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, working with UNICEF and the World Bank, has expanded ECD parenting programs in Islamabad and Gilgit-Baltistan.

All Education Foundations in the country, as semi-autonomous bodies, strongly support ECE within their programs and projects, aligned to Ministry and Department strategies and policies within the federation. Multiple non-government organizations have led the ECCE/ECE movement and its unique innovations in close alliance with government at the provincial and federal level. These include the pioneering work of the Teachers Resource Centre, Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood Education (PAFEC), Rupani Foundation, Cities for Children (CFC), HANDS, Rural Support Programs and the Sindh Rural Support Organization (SRSO), alongside nationwide school systems both for-profit and not-for-profit and non-formal programs. Industry partners have also supported early years programs and day care centers for employees, including product-aligned initiatives for ECCE such as Unilever's "Dirt is Good" etc.

Pakistan's early years landscape is currently split across two distinct tracks progressively covering 0-6 years viz., the 1000-days-conception-to-age-two package addressing partial ECD needs of mother and child (Nashonuma), and ECCE/ECE programs or pre-school provision, now present in most government primary schools within elementary and secondary schools that have primary and pre-primary sections.

Despite this progress, challenges persist across financing, teacher recruitment and preparation, urban-rural disparities, facilities and materials, and monitoring. Age-band enforcement is one such gap: the Single National Curriculum/NCP sets ECE at ages 3 to 5, but oversubscription is common in practice, with children up to age 8 routinely permitted into ECE classrooms (Samuel Hall, 2023), where implementation drifts from policy before questions of facilities or staffing or pedagogy even enter. Pakistan's evolution in ECCE and ECE reflects growing policy maturity and alignment with international evidence, though scalable, sustainable, and equitable models remain limited.

4. Global Trends in ECD/ECCE/ECE

Over the past decade, early childhood education and development have become global priorities, driven by growing evidence linking early brain development with long-term academic and economic benefits (Heckman & Mosso, 2013). Globally, early childhood development has evolved along three movements: expanding access to pre-primary and early learning services, elevating program quality through teacher professional development, play-based curricula, assessment systems, clear measures to monitor quality ECCE/ECE provision and integrating early learning with health, nutrition and social protection for holistic outcomes. Low- and middle-income countries implement mixed delivery models, including public preschools, private centers, NGO and community programs, and home visits, to expand reach while improving quality (Samuel Hall, 2023; WHO et al., 2018).

One major global trend is the shift toward holistic, rights-based frameworks. The Nurturing Care Framework (WHO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2018) has influenced over 60 countries to integrate health, nutrition, early learning, and caregiver support into unified programs. Evidence shows children thrive when early learning is complemented by health screenings, responsive caregiving, and safe environments. A related trend is expanded universal access: countries such as Finland, New Zealand, and Singapore have institutionalized state-funded ECE systems, ensuring all children receive developmentally appropriate early learning regardless of socioeconomic background.

Quality has moved to the forefront. Investments in foundational learning, play-based pedagogy, in-service coaching, and monitoring define best practice (Alotaibi, 2024; Yee et al., 2022). According to OECD (2020), countries that invest in continuous professional development and mentoring show substantial improvements in classroom practices and child outcomes. Play-based learning remains a global best practice, supported by neuroscience demonstrating that exploration, social interaction, and problem-solving strengthen cognitive networks (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). Many countries have also adopted formative assessment tools that track children's holistic development rather than relying on standardized tests. Digital tools complement teacher facilitation but must be balanced with equity concerns (Alotaibi, 2024). Evidence from randomized and quasi-experimental studies guides policy decisions, showing multi-component interventions outperform single-sector programs (Khan et al., 2023).

Equity remains a central challenge. Targeted strategies, including subsidies, conditional cash transfers, and community outreach, are essential to prevent widening disparities. Parental engagement and community-based models have also gained prominence: programs in Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Peru demonstrate that empowering caregivers through parenting education significantly enhances children's readiness for school. Multi-sectoral integration is another global best practice, with countries aligning early childhood services across ministries of health, education, and social welfare to ensure consistent delivery and reduce duplication of resources.

Global trends also highlight inclusive education, focusing on early identification and support for children with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and marginalized groups. High-income countries offer models for inclusive classrooms with trained support staff, adapted materials, and individualized learning plans, while countries such as Colombia and South Africa showcase community-based early childhood centers as cost-effective models for reaching vulnerable populations. Many countries in Africa are also attracting innovative and matching financing for ECCE (Education Outcomes Fund, 2026; GPE & Roger Federer Foundation, 2026).

ECD conceived and delivered from a holistic perspective advances several SDGs through an integrated approach, addressing SDG 1 ("no poverty"), SDG 2 ("zero hunger"), SDG 3 ("good health and well-being"), SDG 4 ("quality education"), SDG 5 ("gender equality"), SDG 6 ("clean water and sanitation"), SDG 8 ("economic growth and decent work"), SDG 10 ("reduced inequalities"), SDG 11 ("safe, inclusive cities"), SDG 16 ("peace, justice and strong institutions"), and SDG 17 ("partnerships").

Pakistan mirrors these global trends and ambitions but faces both financing and implementation gaps. Innovations such as clinic-linked ECD services and LHV-facilitated interventions show feasibility, but scaling requires coordination and sustainable financing. Most education funders active in Pakistan, bilateral, multilateral, foundations, and INGOs, are committed to ECD/ECCE and support programs aligned to national and provincial commitments to the sub-sector, including FCDO, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Food Programme, Save the Children, the LEGO Foundation, IRC, the Aga Khan Foundation, the British Council, and Room to Read.

Committed to the potential of children, the LEGO Foundation centers its work on five characteristics of playful learning: active engagement, meaningful connections, joyful discovery, iterative thinking, and social interaction, supporting a safe and robust beginning to early years investment through partnerships (1986); it has also broadened its support to ECCE in fragile and emergency contexts, guided by principles of play, joy, care, and dignity. The Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood Education (ARNEC) works toward ensuring all young children realize their optimal potential for inclusive well-being through holistic, inclusive, and quality early childhood development; alongside its network partners, it engages in capacity building, community engagement, and climate and environmental research, particularly in flood-affected regions of Pakistan, and has several member organizations working on the current and future prospects of ECD in the country. Similarly, the Early Childhood Education and Development Advocacy Network (EDCAN) actively promote ECD for a safer, happier, and healthier childhood, working with partners globally and in Pakistan.

In conclusion, global trends reflect a maturing ECD agenda, with a growing need for coherence in Pakistan. The ECCE discourse has moved from access to quality, from siloed delivery to integrated, evidence-based models, and from universal expansion to equity-focused implementation (Samuel Hall, 2023; Khan et al., 2023; Alotaibi, 2024). Best practices worldwide reveal that holistic systems grounded in child-centered pedagogy, parental engagement, and cross-sectoral collaboration produce the strongest developmental outcomes, offering valuable insights for countries like Pakistan as they work toward holistic conception, planning, policy action, and assessment.

5. Teaching Methods in ECE Internationally

Teaching methods in early childhood education have evolved significantly over the past decade, influenced by advances in developmental science, neuroscience, and global research on early learning. Internationally, ECE pedagogy now prioritizes child-centered, play-based, inquiry-driven, and socially interactive methods that nurture holistic development. Rather than focusing on rote learning, modern ECE classrooms emphasize active exploration, problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity. These approaches align with global evidence showing that early learning is most effective when children construct knowledge through meaningful interactions and hands-on experiences.

Play-based learning remains the most widely endorsed teaching method across countries. Research by Pyle and Danniels (2017) demonstrates that play supports cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development while fostering intrinsic motivation. Countries such as Finland, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia embed structured and unstructured play into their curricula, allowing children to learn through discovery and guided facilitation. Inquiry-based learning is also prominent

internationally, encouraging children to ask questions, investigate ideas, and engage in critical thinking. This aligns with Reggio Emilia and Montessori philosophies, which emphasize curiosity, autonomy, and collaborative meaning-making.

Multimodal and experiential learning approaches have also gained traction. Teachers use stories, music, movement, sensory activities, and outdoor exploration to support different learning styles. The OECD (2020) highlights that high-performing early childhood systems incorporate routine opportunities for children to engage in language-rich interactions, hands-on tasks, and problem-solving activities. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is another global trend, with teachers embedding empathy-building, emotional regulation, and conflict-resolution activities into daily routines.

Internationally, teacher–child interactions are recognized as central to effective pedagogy. High-quality interactions involve warmth, responsiveness, open-ended questioning, feedback loops, and scaffolding. Research by Pianta et al. (2020) emphasizes that positive educator interactions significantly predict gains in children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development. Many countries have introduced coaching and mentoring systems to support teachers in improving interaction quality.

Digital learning tools have become more common, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, global best practices highlight that technology should complement not replace hands-on learning. Countries such as Singapore and South Korea use digital tools selectively for storytelling, literacy games, and communication with families while ensuring that the majority of ECE learning remains experiential.

Thus, international teaching methods in ECE emphasize holistic, play-based, inquiry-driven, and interaction-rich pedagogy. These methods reflect contemporary evidence showing that young children learn best through exploration, relationships, and meaningful engagement with their environment. Global trends provide a strong foundation for countries seeking to improve early learning quality, demonstrating that effective ECE teaching is grounded in developmental science, creativity, and responsive relationships.

6. Assessment and Monitoring Practices in ECD

Assessment and monitoring practices in Early Childhood Development (ECD) play a crucial role in ensuring that young children are progressing in cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Effective assessment in ECD is fundamentally different from traditional school testing because it focuses on observing learning processes rather than evaluating memorized content. The primary purpose is to understand each child’s developmental stage, identify learning needs, and support holistic growth. According to McAfee and Leong (2018), high-quality ECD assessment emphasizes authentic, play-based observations conducted in natural learning environments such as classrooms, outdoor play areas, and routine activities. These approaches align with developmentally appropriate practices and reduce stress on children who may not respond well to formal testing. Monitoring tools such as anecdotal records, portfolios, developmental checklists, and running observations allow teachers to capture longitudinal evidence of growth.

Globally, ECD quality assurance frameworks highlight the need for continuous assessment rather than one-time evaluations. The NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) recommends systematic documentation that provides regular feedback to caregivers, parents, and school administrators (NAEYC, 2020). This ensures that instruction is responsive and individualized. In many countries, governments have adopted Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) that define age-wise indicators for literacy, numeracy, motor skills, socio-emotional development, and self-

regulation. These standards guide both assessment tools and monitoring systems. For example, the U.S. Head Start Child Outcomes Framework sets nationwide benchmarks for developmental progress, and teachers use formative assessments to align classroom activities with expected outcomes.



Despite their importance, assessment practices face several implementation challenges in low- and middle-income countries. Issues include limited teacher training, the absence of standardized tools, and large class sizes, all of which reduce the reliability of observational assessments. Moreover, research warns against inappropriate school-like testing of young children. Shepard et al. (2020) argue that standardized tests can distort teaching practices, pushing teachers toward rote learning rather than play-based exploration. Countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Kenya still struggle with using school-readiness tests that emphasize literacy and numeracy over holistic development. As a result, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be unfairly labeled as “behind,” which widens inequities.

Monitoring at the system level is equally critical. National ECD monitoring frameworks typically track indicators such as enrollment, classroom quality, teacher-child interaction, health screenings, and parental involvement. UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report (2019) emphasizes that governments must integrate ECD into national EMIS (Education Management Information System s) to systematically track progress across regions. Without structured monitoring, resource allocation becomes inconsistent, leading to inequities in quality and access. Recent global studies also highlight the importance of involving families in assessment processes through regular communication, progress dialogues, and shared learning portfolios (Britto et al., 2017). Parent-teacher collaboration enhances the accuracy of assessments and supports continuity between home and school learning environments.

Overall, assessment and monitoring in ECD require a child-centered, holistic, and culturally responsive approach. When implemented effectively, these practices serve as powerful tools for improving learning outcomes, guiding instructional decisions, and supporting early intervention.

7. Professional Development for ECD

Professional development (PD) for Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners is a cornerstone of high-quality early learning programs. Research consistently shows that teacher knowledge, pedagogical skills, and ongoing capacity-building directly influence children's developmental

outcomes. Early childhood educators must understand child development theories, play-based pedagogy, socio-emotional learning, and inclusive education strategies. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), sustained and structured professional development rather than one-off workshops produces meaningful changes in classroom practice. Effective PD includes mentoring, coaching, peer-learning circles, reflective practice, and classroom-embedded training.

Internationally, countries with strong ECD systems invest heavily in teacher training. For example, Finland requires ECD teachers to hold specialized degrees in early childhood pedagogy, emphasizing developmental psychology and inquiry-based learning. Similarly, New Zealand's Te Whāriki framework embeds professional learning communities within schools, where teachers collaboratively examine teaching practices and children's learning documentation. The OECD (2021) reports that nations with robust professional development policies show higher child engagement, more interactive classrooms, and stronger socio-emotional outcomes.

In low- and middle-income countries, professional development systems are often fragmented. Many ECD teachers lack formal pre-service qualifications, and in-service training opportunities may be limited. Studies in South Asia, including Pakistan, highlight challenges such as insufficient training budgets, reliance on donor-funded short courses, and limited instructional coaching (UNICEF, 2020). As a result, teachers often replicate rote-based primary school methods rather than using play-based, child-centered pedagogy. Without ongoing coaching and supervision, new skills acquired in workshops are not sustained in classrooms. Moreover, the absence of career progression pathways discourages teachers from investing time in professional learning.

Effective PD programs share several common features. First, they are continuous and involve multiple learning modalities. Joyce and Showers (2018) note that professional development that includes coaching increases implementation success from 5% to over 90%. Second, PD must be contextually relevant, aligned with local cultural expectations, curriculum frameworks, and classroom realities. Third, collaborative learning environments, such as teacher networks or cluster meetings, foster reflective practice and innovation. Fourth, digital learning platforms are increasingly supporting ECD teacher development, especially after COVID-19. Online modules, virtual coaching, and mobile-based micro-courses have become cost-effective tools for reaching large numbers of teachers, particularly in remote areas.

Another crucial component is leadership development for school heads and ECD coordinators. Effective instructional leadership provides teachers with feedback, resources, and emotional support. Countries like Singapore have integrated leadership training into early childhood policy, enabling principals to mentor teachers and sustain quality improvements. Finally, monitoring and evaluation of PD initiatives help ensure that training leads to measurable improvements in classroom quality and child outcomes.

In summary, professional development is essential for strengthening ECD quality. Sustainable, ongoing, and well-designed PD programs enhance teacher competence, support play-based learning, promote inclusion, and ultimately improve children's holistic development.

8. Access to Enabling Resources in ECD Programs

Access to enabling resources such as learning materials, trained teachers, safe infrastructure, nutrition services, and parental engagement is fundamental for delivering high-quality ECD programs. Research

confirms that resource availability directly influences children's learning environment and developmental outcomes. According to the World Bank (2018), well-resourced ECD centers provide stimulating environments that promote exploration, creativity, and socio-emotional development. Learning materials such as manipulatives, picture books, blocks, art supplies, and sensory tools help children develop cognitive, motor, and language skills through play-based interactions. Without these resources, teachers struggle to implement activity-based pedagogy, and children miss essential learning experiences.

Infrastructure quality is another major determinant. Safe, well-ventilated classrooms, age-appropriate furniture, accessible toilets, outdoor play spaces, and child-friendly shelters create secure and engaging learning environments. A landmark UNICEF (2019) study showed that children enrolled in ECD centers with high-quality infrastructure demonstrated significantly better school-readiness outcomes than those in under-resourced settings. Adequate teacher-child ratios also play an essential role. Overcrowded classrooms reduce individualized attention and make it difficult to observe children's developmental progress. Countries with high-performing ECD systems, such as Sweden and Japan, enforce strict class-size regulations to ensure meaningful teacher-child interaction.

Another crucial enabling resource is nutrition and health support. ECD centers often serve as platforms for growth monitoring, immunization, deworming, and early screening for developmental delays. Research from Engle et al. (2011) emphasizes that integrated health-nutrition-education interventions produce the strongest outcomes for children aged 0–8. Malnutrition, anemia, and untreated illnesses negatively affect cognitive development, attention span, and socio-emotional functioning. Therefore, ECD programs must coordinate with health departments to provide holistic services. Many countries, such as Jamaica and Brazil, implement integrated child-development centers that combine learning with nutrition supplementation.

Parental and community engagement further enhances resource access. When parents are involved in learning activities, contribute materials, or participate in school management committees, ECD centers become more sustainable. UNESCO (2020) highlights that community-supported preschools in Nepal and Ethiopia improved resource availability even in low-income contexts. Local ownership ensures continuity and relevance, especially where government resources are limited.

However, resource disparities remain a major barrier in developing countries. Rural and low-income regions often lack age-appropriate materials, qualified teachers, and safe classrooms. In Pakistan, for example, ECE classrooms may operate without basic play materials or dedicated spaces, forcing teachers to use primary-school pedagogies. Additionally, budget allocations for early childhood are often low, despite high returns on investment. The World Bank estimates that every dollar invested in ECD yields up to \$17 in social and economic benefits, yet spending remains inadequate (Zubairi & Rose, 2017).

To strengthen ECD programs, policymakers must ensure equitable distribution of resources across geographic and socio-economic groups. Public-private partnerships, community-driven models, and donor investments can help bridge gaps. Digital resources such as educational apps, audio stories, and low-cost tablets also offer promising solutions, especially in underserved areas.

9. Socio-Economic & Cultural Barriers to ECCE

Socio-economic and cultural barriers significantly affect access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Poverty, gender norms, cultural beliefs, and lack of parental awareness often restrict young children's participation in early learning programs. According to UNESCO (2021), children from the poorest households are five times less likely to attend ECCE programs than those from wealthier families. Poverty affects enrollment through multiple pathways: inability to afford fees, inadequate transport, and parents' need for children's labor or caregiving support. These constraints reduce opportunities for early stimulation, which disproportionately affects cognitive and linguistic development during critical early years.



Cultural beliefs and gender norms also shape ECCE participation. In some communities, early learning is perceived as unnecessary because "children learn naturally at home." Traditional views may prioritize boys' education over girls', limiting girls' enrollment in ECD centers. A study by Rao and Sun (2015) highlights that parental beliefs strongly influence early childhood participation, with many families viewing ECCE merely as childcare rather than as foundational education. In societies where extended families live together, grandparents may prefer home-based care, believing that formal settings are unsafe or too academic for young children. These cultural narratives reduce demand for ECCE services even when they are available.

Parents' lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of ECCE is another major barrier. Research from the Brookings Institution (2020) demonstrates that informing parents about the developmental advantages of early learning increases enrollment by up to 15 percent. However, in many low-income communities, parents may not understand developmental milestones or may believe that structured learning should begin only in primary school. This misconception contributes to school-readiness gaps that persist throughout the child's education.

Infrastructure shortcomings also intersect with socio-economic barriers. Remote or marginalized communities often lack accessible ECD centers. For families living far from schools, especially in mountainous or underserved rural regions, the physical distance becomes an insurmountable barrier. Additionally, the absence of female teachers, which is often required by cultural norms, discourages parents from sending girls to ECD centers. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, for example, families may avoid sending young daughters to centers without female staff, further reducing gender equity (UNICEF, 2020).

Children with disabilities face compounded exclusion from ECCE services. Limited early identification systems, stigma surrounding disability, and a lack of trained teachers and accessible infrastructure restrict participation. Many ECE classrooms are not physically accessible, nor are teachers equipped to support diverse learning needs. The absence of inclusive education policies and disability-disaggregated data further obscures the extent of exclusion, limiting targeted interventions.

Language barriers contribute to exclusion as well. Many ECCE programs operate in national or dominant languages rather than mother tongues. Young children who do not speak the school language may experience anxiety, exclusion, or labeling as "slow learners." UNESCO emphasizes the importance of mother-tongue instruction in early years to promote identity, confidence, and cognitive development.

Lastly, climate change affected, refugees/host communities, internally displaced, and migrant children encounter additional barriers, including documentation requirements, mobility instability, and limited integration into public education systems. Language differences and trauma-related developmental challenges further affect readiness and participation in early learning programs. Without flexible enrollment policies and psychosocial support mechanisms, displaced children remain disproportionately excluded.

To address socio-economic and cultural barriers, multi-sectoral interventions are essential. Pakistan's own data underscores why: services to young children are currently delivered in silos, reaching most families through the Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illness (IMNCI) platform, with limited coverage for children under three, precisely the age range where early stimulation and responsive care matter most. Community awareness campaigns, parenting sessions, mother-tongue learning materials, and targeted subsidies can close gaps in participation. Conditional cash transfers, as implemented in Latin America, have significantly increased ECCE attendance. Women's empowerment programs, such as training mothers as community-based ECD facilitators, have also proven effective in South Asia and Africa.

The Policy and Systems Landscape of ECE in Pakistan



1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has gained sustained recognition as an important subsector in Pakistan's education system over the past decade transitioning from a peripheral concept and casual practice to a policy and planning priority. This shift is rooted in evidence from neuroscience, which establishes that 95 percent of brain development occurs in the first eight years of life (Nelson et al., 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012). These years form the foundation for future learning, health, and well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) defines early child development as the cognitive, physical, socioemotional, and language growth of children from conception to eight years emphasizing the need for nurturing care, health, nutrition, and early stimulation.

In Pakistan, the importance of ECE is also underpinned by social and developmental challenges. Approximately 40 percent of children under five are stunted, 18 percent are wasted, and 40 percent are underweight, with low birth registration (42 percent) impeding access to services (NCRC & UNICEF, 2024). These deprivations are especially pronounced in Sindh and Balochistan, where stunting rates exceed 45 percent. Together, these indicators underscore the urgency of investing in early learning and care.

2. Policy and Legal Framework

The Education Conference 1947 recognized Nursery to be an integral part of mainstream education. However, no national education policy recognized ECE as a formal sub-sector of education until the 1992 National Education Policy (NEP) where it was suggested to mainstream "*katchi*" classes. Although pre-primary classes were first recognized in Pakistan in the 1970s as the 'Katchi' ('raw') or pre-primary class where children between three and six years of age would be left in schools by parents/guardians prior to primary grade 1 enrolment for early school readiness; however, they were not formally registered as enrolled in schools but as an informal preparatory group.

The Katchi class was officially recognized under the NEP 1998 - 2010, although no separate budget, workforce, or curriculum was designated for pre-primary ECE; it continued to be adjusted within primary schools or primary sections of elementary and secondary schools. Prior to the 1990s, ECE was perceived as essentially a private sector offering, as a luxury of privileged classes in private schools, and not an essential part of core schooling/education.

Following the 1998-2010 NEP, the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) Action Plan 2001-2005/6 was developed through a consensus-based nationwide process to implement the NEP. ECE was formally included in the ESR Action Plan (pp. 39-42) as an innovative program backed by a comprehensive design, dedicated workforce, facilities, and budgets for all provinces and areas. This was followed by the first ECE Curriculum 2002 (see section on Curriculum below).

The first National Curriculum for ECE was developed in 2002, by the Ministry of Education introducing structured learning standards emphasizing play-based pedagogies in collaboration with the Teachers Resource Centre (TRC). The National Education Policy 2009 followed, with a dedicated section on ECE, and an ECE upgraded curriculum (2007) was introduced progressively with Early Learning Development Standards (2009). The dedicated chapter on ECE in the National Education Policy 2017 (draft), was harmonized within the Single National Curriculum (SNC)/NCP (2020). In 2010, the 18th Amendment devolved primary education, including ECE, to the provinces.

Since 2010 the provincial policy and implementation of ECE policy has varied widely.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2009 had a broader space for ECE with clear policy actions. The NEP 2009 was provided cover by the Joint Declaration in 2011 signed by the Prime Minister and respective Provincial Governments for the transition and implementation of NEP 2009 in the post-devolution of education as a completely provincial subject

The constitutional provision under Article 25-A guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for all children aged 5–16 years. Although ECE formally targets ages 3–5, its inclusion in education policies and frameworks reflects a growing recognition of its value for school readiness and equity.

ECE is explicitly recognized in provincial education sector plans and laws across the country, including the *Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2013)*, *Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act (2014)*, *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Free Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education Act (2017)*, and *ICT Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2012)*. However, inconsistencies remain in age definitions and implementation frameworks across provinces.

Table 4: Status of the Right to Education Acts

Province / Region	Law / Year	Article(s) Referencing ECE	ECE Provision Status	Summary of Provision / Status
Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)	Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2012	Article 9	Included	The government may provide free pre-school education and early childhood care for children above three years until they join school.
Sindh	Sindh Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013	Article 9	Included	The government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education and early childhood care for children above three years until school entry.
Punjab	Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2014	Article 10	Included	Government or local authority may establish or merge kindergartens or childcare centres for providing free pre-school education and early childhood care for children above three years until school entry.
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2017	—	Not Included	The law covers children aged 5–16 years with no mention of pre-primary or early childhood education; ECE is, however, referenced in the KP Education Sector Plan and other provincial initiatives.
Balochistan	Balochistan Compulsory Education Act, 2014	—	Not Included	The Act provides for free education for ages 5–16 years only; ECE is not included in the legal text though ECE initiatives exist within the provincial sector plan and curriculum reforms.

18th Amendment ECE in Laws: Following the adoption of the 18th amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan in 2010 led to two major shifts for the education sector in Pakistan viz. i) elimination of education as a concurrent subject with complete devolution of the sector to the provinces in terms of their responsibility to address policy, budgets, curriculum, language and implementation and, ii) Education was elevated to the status of ‘a fundamental right’ and not just as a subject under the ‘principles of policy’ with the addition of Article 25 A. The historic fundamental right to education (RTE) stated:

- **“The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.”**

Following the adoption of 25 A, each province and the federal government began to craft their own RTE laws from 2012 to 2017. Of the five laws at federal and provincial levels, three are clearly committed to and have provisioned for ECE viz. Islamabad Capital Territory, Sindh, and Punjab.

Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2012 (29 Articles) (for ICT only)

- **Article 9** Appropriate Government shall provide pre-school education. The appropriate Government may make necessary arrangements for providing free pre-school education and early childhood care for children above the age of three years until they join the school for education.

Sindh Free and Compulsory Education Act 2013 (30 Articles)

- **Article 9:** Provision for Free Pre School Education: The Government may make necessary arrangements for providing free preschool education and early childhood care for children above the age of three years until they join the school for education.

Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act 2014 (26 articles)

- **Article 10:** Pre-school education. The Government or the local authority may establish a kindergarten school or childcare center in a local area or consolidate or merge such schools or centers to provide free pre-school education and early childhood care for children above the age of three years or older until they join a school for education.

ECE inclusion in 25 A laws is a bold, intentional step by respective governments to stretch the age boundaries of 5-16 years to include 3-16 years, clearly including early years. This is fully backed by the fundamental constitutional right, in such a manner as may be determined by law and decided according to provincial priorities. Despite this legal backing, however, ongoing policy, governance, and financing discourse does not fully reflect ECE's legal status, comprehensive planning, budgeting, and data collection rarely treat the sub-sector in its own right.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan remain silent on Pre-Primary/ECE in their respective RTE laws, and neither has been amended to date to include the sub-sector.

Yet both provinces, like others, have substantive provisions for ECE in their sector plans, training, textbooks, content and other initiatives. **The current absence of ECE in the RTE laws of the two provinces must be addressed for uniformity on ECE presence across the country.**

Following the laws, robust policies need to be developed for ECE/ECCE substantively.

Specific Policies and Frameworks on ECE/ECCE in Provinces

The following have been recent developments in each province regarding ECE/ECCE policies:

- Sindh ECCE Policy 2015 (Government of Sindh, 2015) was preceded in September 2014 by a regional South Asian conference coordinated by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) in collaboration with the Government of Sindh which resulted in the Karachi Consensus Statement on ECED (Government of Sindh & ITA, 2014).
- Balochistan ECE Policy Framework 2015 (Government of Balochistan, 2015)
- Punjab ECE Policy 2017 (Government of Punjab, 2017)
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ECE Policy Draft (to be finalized)

The provincial governments/ICT have autonomy and responsibility to define the ECE/ECCE strategy, planning, financing and service delivery in their respective provinces.

The Policies have deepened ownership of the ECE sector with each iteration making the landscape richer and deeper. The draft 2017–2025 NEP (Government of Pakistan, 2017) was developed through a consultative process remained still born due to the change of government; it had a comprehensive Chapter 4 on ECE and recently followed by the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2024 (section 5.3) (Government of Pakistan, 2024) developed by the MoFE&PT /PIE providing endorsement to the sub-sector underscoring the importance of continuity across pre-primary and primary subsectors for learning outcomes, care and quality. These policies collectively signify a maturing policy

ecosystem, embedding ECE within provincial governance, sector plans, and teacher management systems.

In 2024 following the call to action and the commitment of the Govt. of Pakistan at the Transforming Education Summit (TES) 2022 at the UN General Assembly for foundational learning, there have been concerted actions to build a movement for FL across Pakistan to address both Learning Poverty (77 %) accelerated during COVID-19 and the apocalyptic floods due to climate change (2022) leading to rising OOSC in the country. Following TES in September 2022, the Govt of Pakistan also committed to actions at the Tashkent Declaration (Nov. 2022) at the World Conference on ECCE.

The national and provincial conference “Pakistan Learning Conference: Building Foundations June 22-23, 2023” (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2023) were hosted by the Federal and Sindh Governments to focus on both FL and ECE, as did the Sindh Conference and Call to Action on ECCE and Foundational Learning in Emergencies (July 2023) (SELD, 2023). MoFEPT moved forward to set up the Pakistan Foundational Learning (PFL) Hub (Pakistan Foundational Learning Hub, 2023) on September 08, 2023, with a clear mandate to crowdsource solutions for FL and accelerate policies for FL across the country.

3. Provincial Context

After the 18th Amendment, provinces assumed responsibility for education, embedding ECE into their sectoral priorities.

- **Punjab:** The Punjab Education Sector Plan (PESP II 2013–2017, Extended 2018–2022) identifies ECE as a reform area. The recently concluded Punjab Human Capital Investment Project (PHCIP, 2020–2025), a multi-sectoral collaboration between PSPA, P&SHD/Aaghosh, TALEEM, and SED/Bunad supported by the World Bank, GPE, and UNICEF, integrated ECE with health and nutrition interventions to address poverty, stunting, early stimulation, and access to quality early learning. ‘Getting Results: Access and Delivery of Quality Education Services (GRADES)’ is a World Bank program with significant support to ECE in the province.
- **Sindh:** The Sindh Education Sector Plans (2014–2018; 2019–2023/4) include ECE and Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), supported by UNICEF and the World Bank (ASPIRE/SELECT projects), among others. The Sindh ECCE and Foundational Learning Policy 2024 have fully integrated ECCE into provincial policies and programs (see Policy and Legal Framework). The recently launched Mc-Govern-Dole Sindh School Meals Program (2026-2030) supported by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) covers five districts as a multi-sectoral initiative (nutrition, WASH and Foundational Learning including ECE). The Sindh Social Protection Authority (SSPA) has integrated the MAMTA Program (equivalent of NashoNuma under BISP) covering the first 1,000 days of the child and mother, linking maternal health and early childhood development.

Sindh remains the only province with a dedicated Early Childhood Teacher cadre (see Access and Quality). The School Education & Literacy Department's Call to Action for ECCE in Emergencies outlines a coordinated multi-sectoral framework addressing foundational learning and ECCE challenges across education, health, and protection sectors, prepared following a two-day conference on Foundational Learning and ECCE in Emergencies (SELD, 2023).

- **Balochistan:** The Balochistan Education Sector Plan (BESP 2013–2018, Updated 2020–2025) advanced ECE through community-based centers, in partnership with UNICEF, VSO, and RSPN/BRSP, including in emergency contexts and with refugee and host communities. The GRADES program (World Bank) also supports ECE in the province. Initiatives focus on teacher

training, play-based classroom environments, and youth volunteer engagement in marginalized areas.

- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa:** The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan (KESP 2015–2020, 2020–2025) integrates ECE within early grade reforms, focusing on literacy and numeracy, and establishing model ECE classrooms through development partner support, including UNICEF, VSO, RSPN/BRSP, and ITA, with a focus on emergency contexts and refugee and host communities. The province's ECE Policy is under finalization. ECE is also part of the Schools 2030 program in Chitral, supported by the Aga Khan Foundation.
- **ICT, Gilgit-Baltistan, and AJK:** Policy recognition of ECE exists, but implementation remains limited to small-scale pilots by UNICEF, AKF (Schools 2030 in GB) AKES, and CSOs.
- All Education Sector Plans in provinces are being updated supported by GPE and development partners to cover 2025-2030 period with clear support to ECE as an essential sub-sector.

Within all provinces, teacher preparation and deployment remain critical bottlenecks. ECE curriculum development, materials, teacher training and support are overseen by provincial and federal institutions:

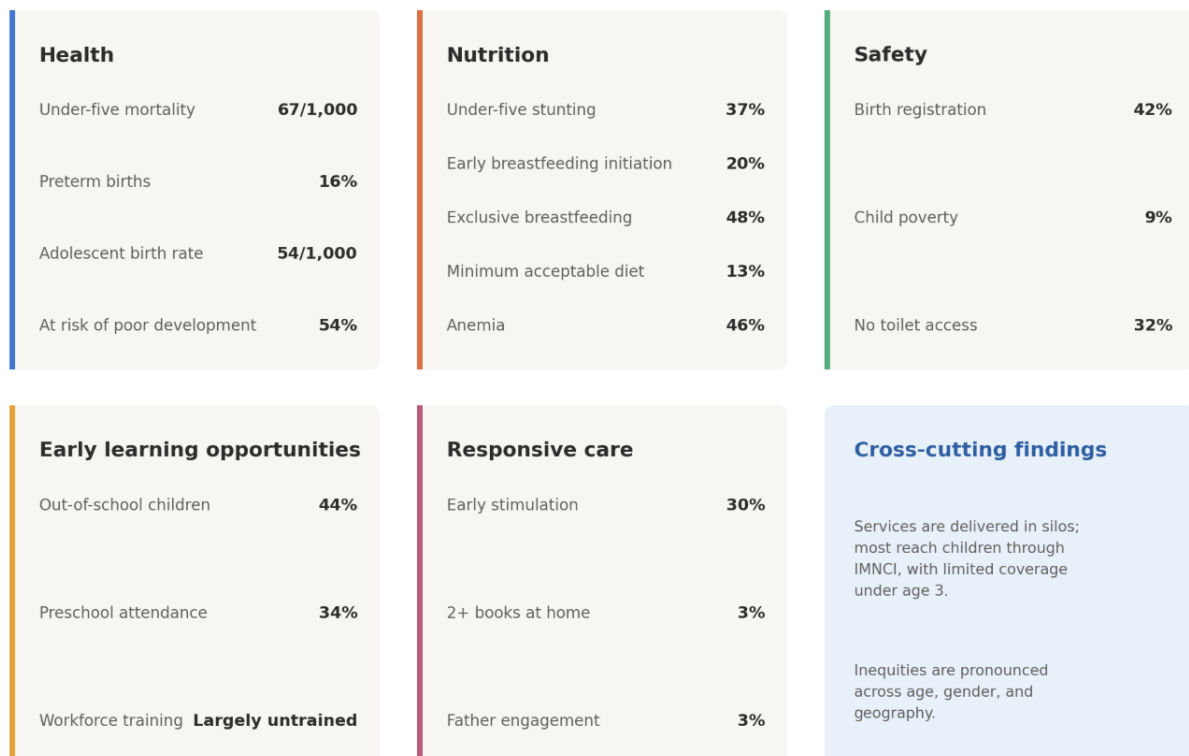
- PECTAA: Punjab Education Curriculum Training and Assessment Authority (Punjab),
- STEDA (SINDH): Sindh Teacher Education Development Authority,
- DCAR (SINDH): Directorate of Curriculum Assessment and Research,
- DCTE (KP): the Directorate of Curriculum and Teacher Education,
- DPD (KP): the Directorate of Professional Development
- PITE (Balochistan): the Provincial Institute for Teacher Education, and
- FDE (ICT): the Federal Directorate of Education; academic and training wings.

Sindh is the only province to have created a dedicated Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) cadre, introduced in 2017/18 at BPS-15 (Government of Sindh, 2015; Samuel Hall, 2023), implementing a key recommendation of the Karachi Consensus Statement on ECED (Government of Sindh & ITA, 2014) to professionalize the ECE workforce.

4. Multi-Sectoral Linkages

Figure 3: Pakistan's ECD Profile

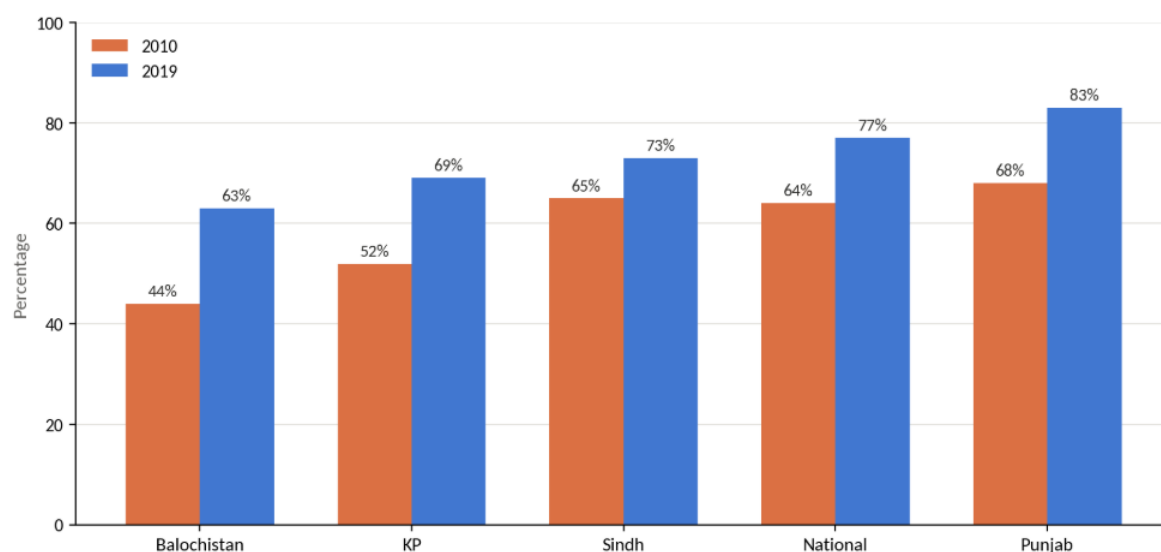
Pakistan's early childhood development profile
(Nurturing Care Framework components)



Source: Countdown to 2030 for Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health — Country Profiles for Early Childhood Development

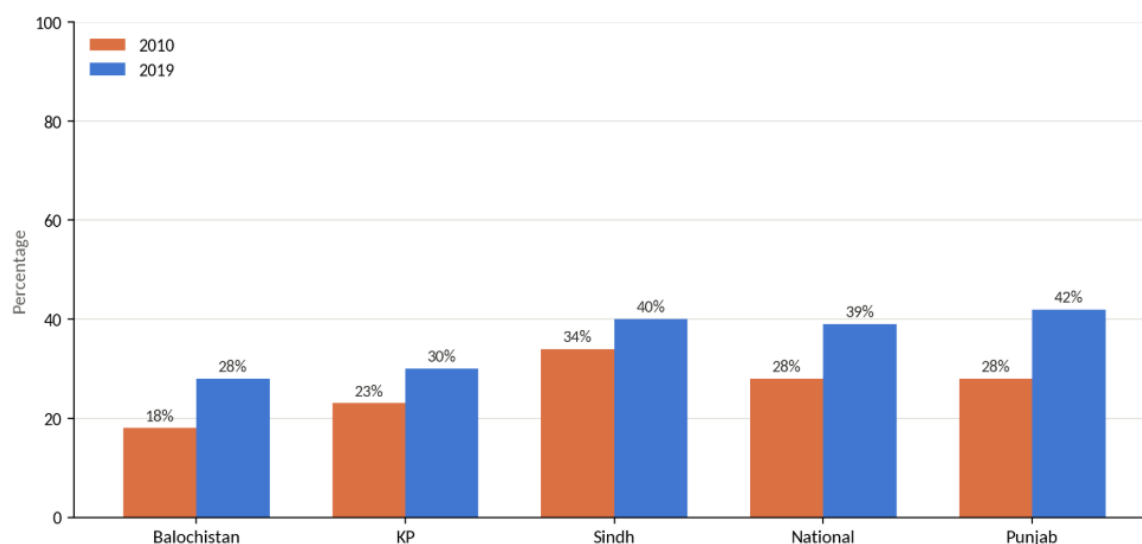
Pakistan illustrates the scale of the problem of inadequate early childhood development concretely. Countdown to 2030's Country Profile for Early Childhood Development finds that only 30 percent of Pakistani children receive early stimulation, just 3 percent have access to two or more books at home, and only 3 percent report father engagement in early childhood care, the weakest-performing indicators of the five Nurturing Care Framework components measured nationally. These figures sit alongside 44 percent of children out of school and only 34 percent attending preschool, suggesting that the awareness and demand-side barriers documented globally are not just present in Pakistan but pronounced, even where physical access to ECE exists, the surrounding conditions that support a child's development at home often do not.

Figure 4. Prenatal care consultation, 2010 vs. 2019



Source: PSLM 2010-2019.

Figure 5. Postnatal care visits within six weeks, 2010 vs. 2019



Source: PSLM 2010-2019.

Maternal healthcare access is one of the clearest illustrations of why ECD outcomes cannot be addressed through the education sector alone. A child's developmental trajectory begins well before the age of formal ECE enrollment, shaped by the quality of care received during pregnancy and in the weeks immediately following birth. Trends in this area help contextualize the picture presented above.

Prenatal care consultation rose nationally from 64 to 77 percent between 2010 and 2019, and postnatal care visits within six weeks of childbirth rose from 28 to 39 percent over the same period. Both indicators moved in the right direction across every region, and Balochistan recorded the largest percentage-point gain in prenatal care of any region, from 44 to 63 percent.

Even with this progress, gaps remain that echo the pattern seen in the Nurturing Care Framework indicators above. Postnatal care lags well behind prenatal care in every region, meaning fewer than half of mothers and babies nationally receive care in the critical weeks immediately after birth, precisely the window when responsive caregiving and early stimulation begin to matter most. Balochistan remains the lowest-performing region on both measures in 2019 despite its gains, consistent with the province's weaker outcomes across the health, nutrition, and early learning indicators already discussed. Together, these trends make a direct case for multisectoral coordination: the conditions shaping a child's development are incomplete not only at home during the early years, but earlier still, in the healthcare access surrounding pregnancy and birth, a health-sector responsibility with lasting consequences for the education sector's work.

5. Multi-Sectoral Approaches and Key Programs

Recognizing that learning outcomes are shaped by broader developmental factors, Pakistan has initiated multi-sectoral programs linking education, health, nutrition, and social protection.

- The *Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN)* initiative under the *Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (MoPDSI)* connects early learning and nutrition through the *SUN Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA)*, combining efforts in health, nutrition, and early stimulation.
- The *Punjab Human Capital Investment Project (PHCIP)* (World Bank loan, 2020–2025) operated in 12 districts targeting children aged 0–8 years. It addressed four risk factors, such as poverty, stunting, early stimulation, and lack of access to quality ECE, through the coordinated efforts of the *Punjab Social Protection Authority, Primary and Secondary Healthcare Department, and School Education Department*.
- Under social protection programs, the *Nashonuma Program* (Benazir Income Support Programme, BISP) supports mother and child health and nutrition during the first 1,000 days, while the *Mamta Program* in Sindh targets similar goals for early childhood care.

These initiatives illustrate an evolving recognition of ECD as a continuum (0–8 years), requiring inter-sectoral coordination between education, health, nutrition, and social welfare sectors.

Building on these global commitments (see Policy and Legal Framework), MoFEPT established the Pakistan Foundational Learning (PFL) Hub on September 8, 2023, supported by FCDO and now transitioning to PIE with UNICEF support, following a South-South learning visit to Sobral, Brazil. The Hub coordinates policy, evidence, resources, and partnerships to accelerate foundational learning and early childhood education nationwide. World Bank-supported programs ASPIRE, SELECT, PHCIP, and GRADES are aligned with this effort, integrating ECE into broader foundational learning and systems-strengthening agendas, alongside GPE's support for ECE under TALEEM with UNICEF and the government.

The Social Protection and 1000 days of ECD initiative under the Strengthening Social Protection Delivery System in Sindh (SSPDS) (World Bank, 2022) is linked directly with Early Childhood Education. The reason is that this lays foundational ground for a child's readiness for school through physical,

cognitive, and emotional development. The program, in a way, ensures that a child is ready for an ECE program through addressing developmental delays, malnutrition, and health challenges. Through this, a healthy and well-nourished child will be inducted in ECE, achieving success and effective participation in the early education environment.

At the provincial level, the Sindh and Federal Governments jointly convened the Pakistan Learning Conference: Building Foundations (June 2023) and the Sindh Call to Action on ECE and Foundational Learning in Emergencies (July 2023), reaffirming sub-national and federal commitment to early learning as a national priority.

ECE in emergencies fell beyond the scope of this study. It is, however, increasingly recognized as more than a "safe space" during crises. It is a key area of holistic support, one that must not overlook children aged 3 to 5, or 3 to 8, as climate-related emergencies rise across Pakistan. Recent work by the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) on early years in emergencies, and by ITA with support from the Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC, 2024–2025) on the impact of climate change on children and caregivers in Sindh, points to a consistent finding: ECE remains largely overlooked within Pakistan's Education in Emergencies response, despite growing attention to the sub-sector elsewhere.

The scale of the risk is already evident. The 2022 floods created a humanitarian crisis affecting 33 million people, including 9.6 million children, and disrupted every sector, including health, nutrition, WASH, education, and child protection (UNICEF, 2022). More than 7,000 schools in flood-affected areas were used as shelters for displaced people, and UNICEF and other actors worked to clear and dewater schools, establish temporary learning centres, and build teacher capacity to offset the resulting learning losses. Pakistan's already-limited school infrastructure is not equipped to withstand climate-related shocks of this scale, whether severe flooding or extreme heat, and heat waves in particular remain poorly planned for, disrupting ECE learning even in years without major disasters. COVID-19 offered an earlier warning of the same underlying problem, the need for durable, long-term solutions rather than one-off emergency response. TRC has developed a climate change curriculum from K-12 covering early years endorsed by provinces and federal government

To support learning continuity during climate emergencies and fragile settings, specialized resource packages such as the Early Childhood Development Kit (UNICEF, 2019) provide essential play-based materials to foster cognitive and socio-emotional resilience. There is a growing recognition of education in emergencies within discourse and practice in Pakistan with the Education Sector Working Group playing a pivotal role in introducing important ideas around anticipatory action as well. However, the significance and priority afforded to ECE within education in emergencies has traditionally been quite low.

6. Learning Crisis and Implications for ECE

Pakistan's learning crisis begins early. The *ASER 2023* data show that only 17.6 percent of Grade 3 children across all rural areas of Pakistan (National) can read a simple Urdu, Sindhi, or Pashto story, and 12.6 percent can solve two-digit division indicating weak foundational learning. Many children enter Grade 1 without prior ECE exposure, resulting in low school readiness and early dropouts. Nationally, only about one-third of schools report having an ECE classroom, and fewer than half have trained teachers or age-appropriate learning materials (Pakistan Education Statistics, AEPAM 2021–22).

The integration of ECCE into sectoral plans and budgets focusing on dedicated facilities, curriculum standards, SLOs, workforce development, classroom practices, and assessment systems is vital to ensure readiness and reduce inequities in early learning. Evidence from global studies (Heckman, 2006; Brito et al., 2017; Lancet Series, 2016) confirms that investing in early years yields high economic and social returns, while delays widen inequality.

6. Financing and Systemic Gaps in Early Childhood Education

Despite growing recognition of its importance, Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Pakistan remains chronically underfunded and largely invisible in sectoral financing and data systems. While global evidence, such as Pauline Rose's work on education financing underscores that investment in early years yields the highest long-term returns, Pakistan's public education budgets continue to allocate minimal and opaque funding to ECE.

Pakistan's education system is funded primarily through provincial and federal funding. The ECE budget constitutes only 1-3 percent of the total education budget across provinces and federal areas. Despite increasing enrolment, recent trends show a decrease in overall education spending, leading to insufficient investment in ECE. In addition to this regular education funding, the federal government has initiated a range of education development projects in line with its Public Sector Development Programme. Provincially, governments are prioritizing areas of intervention in the education sector through their provincial Annual Development Programmes. During 2020-2021, these were primarily utilized towards school education, including primary education (of which ECE has an unknown allocation of funds), and the strengthening of the various provincial institutes for teacher education was noted to be an area of budget allocation.

Moreover, according to the *Public Financing of Education in Pakistan* study by the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE, 2024), current public expenditure reporting still classifies ECE within the broad functional code "091 – Pre-primary and Primary Education Affairs and Services." This coding, a legacy of existing government structures, makes it difficult to isolate spending specific to the early years.

This coding is consistent across provinces and federal areas, except Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where it appears under 'Elementary & Secondary' instead, making it even harder to determine whether ECE spending is treated as a distinct priority or simply merged into primary and elementary allocations.

PIE's analysis underscores a persistent challenge for policymakers seeking to track ECE investments and plan effectively for this subsector.

Provincial education sector plans may be rich with ECE language, but those policies are rarely matched by dedicated budget lines, workforce planning or data systems that treat the age group 3–5 years as distinct. Instead, ECE is embedded within primary levels, making it easy for it to be sidelined.

The **Nawaz Sharif Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Education** is a government initiative in Punjab, Pakistan, inaugurated in May 2025 by Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif. It is the first state-of-the-art early childhood education centre in the country, aimed at providing **free, high-quality preschool and foundational education** for young children aged roughly 4–5.5 years. The center is located within the *Children Library Complex (CLC)* in Lahore and was established to serve as a **model public sector institution** that integrates modern early learning practices, colorful child-friendly classrooms, and comprehensive facilities such as a gymnasium, swimming pool, art and activity spaces. Its design and curriculum reflect a commitment to nurturing creativity, critical thinking, motor skills, language development, and social-emotional growth in early learners, with the objective of setting a benchmark for universal access to quality early education. The center also forms part of broader provincial education reforms aimed at elevating public school standards and expanding early childhood education infrastructure across Punjab.

This lack of a distinct budget line or object code creates a significant data vacuum, rendering it impossible for policymakers to track or safeguard funds intended for specialized ECE inputs. Essential components such as age-appropriate learning and play materials, specialized caregiver-specific training, or the development of dedicated "Katchi" environments cannot be isolated or audited within the current system. Consequently, the sector suffers from severe allocative inefficiency; without granular transparency, there is no mechanism to ensure that even minimal allocations reach the classroom level. Instead, the early years remain a residual beneficiary of primary-level spillover, rather than a strategic priority.

Until ECE is clearly budgeted, tracked as a separate sub-sector, and integrated within core education systems, the promise of pre-primary education will remain unfulfilled.

At the same time, several initiatives are underway across provinces to strengthen ECE, often through infrastructure and pilot projects. Flagship examples such as the Nawaz Sharif Centre of Excellence in Lahore-Punjab, established to expand pre-primary classrooms and early learning centres, and the Taleem Project, which places ECE at its core, demonstrate growing provincial commitment to early learning in Punjab. The provinces are investing considerable effort, yet the heart of the matter in terms of sustainable financing, institutional ownership, and systemic data visibility remains elusive.

7. Monitoring, Assessment, and Curriculum in ECE

Pakistan has developed a range of assessment tools to monitor and improve ECE quality, building on the Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS, 2010) and the National Curriculum for ECE (2020). These include internationally validated tools such as **IDELA**, **MELQO**, **MELE**, and **MODEL**, as well as the **Pakistan Early Childhood Development Index (P-ECDI)** and the **PAL-ELANA** for early literacy and numeracy. The **World Bank's TEACH-ECE** classroom observation tool has also been tested and capacity has been built for partners in the country. Together, these innovations strengthen national and provincial capacities to measure learning environments and child outcomes across the eight developmental domains outlined in the ECE curriculum.

Concurrently with the ECE Innovative Program (2001-2005/6) under the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) Action Plan, the first ECE curriculum was finalized in 2002 by the Ministry of Education collaboratively with Teachers Resource Centre (TRC). The ECE curriculum was updated in 2006/7 both in English and Urdu, followed by the Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) in 2010, in collaboration with UNICEF/UNESCO, and Sindh ELDS 2018, and the National Curriculum for ECE under the National Curriculum Council (NCC), approved and adopted by all provinces in 2020 (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2020).

The National Curriculum of Pakistan (NCP) for ECE (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2020) elaborates eight developmental domains along with their specific student learning outcomes (SLOs):

1. Physical Development
2. Social and Moral Development
3. Emotional Development
4. Language Development
5. Cognitive Development
6. The World Around Us
7. Health, Hygiene, and Safety:
8. Creative Arts

Building on the ELDS (2010) and the national curriculum, a range of assessment tools have been developed or aligned for use in Pakistan, including SLO-based formative assessments across the eight developmental domains, alongside the following internationally developed tools, most of which are freely available to adapt:

- **IDELA** or International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA), Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes (MELQO) aligned to NCC with tools/ modules that assess classroom quality and child development outcomes, MELE on measuring early learning environment, and MODEL.
- **PAL- ELANA**, Early Language, Literacy & Numeracy Assessment by the People's Action for Learning Network and its partners (ASER Centre/Pratham and ACER)
- **MICS**: Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, the UNICEF Early Childhood Development (ECD) Kit (UNICEF, 2019), and the P-ECDI Toolkit or the Pakistan Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) Toolkit. This includes modules of the Pakistan Early Child Development Tool Kit. The P-ECDI Toolbox Core modules cover Early Child Development and Learning, Enabling Policy and Environment, alongside supplementary modules for Nurturing Care, Caregiver Wellbeing, and Caregiver Resources.
- **TEACH ECE** The World Bank's TEACH–ECE classroom observation-monitoring tool (World Bank, 2021) has also been tested and capacity has been built for partners in the country.

8. Challenges and Opportunities

While Pakistan's policy landscape for ECE has strengthened, implementation remains uneven, particularly for marginalized and rural populations. Persistent challenges include insufficient financing, workforce capacity gaps, and weak monitoring mechanisms. However, growing political attention, integration within sector plans, and multi-sectoral programs (e.g., SUN, PHCIP, Nashonuma) offer promising opportunities for systemic reform. Targeted efforts toward standardizing definitions, ensuring cross-sector coordination, and expanding quality ECE to the poorest households will be critical to achieving SDG 4.2 and building foundational learning for all children.

Despite substantial policy progress, ECE remains underreported in national data systems such as EMIS, PSLM, and budget statements, often subsumed under primary education. This underrepresentation constrains visibility and funding for the subsector. Addressing these data and financing gaps alongside improving workforce structures and intersectoral governance will be essential to consolidate ECE as a coherent and well-resourced component of Pakistan's education system.

A recent study by the **Pakistan Foundational Learning Hub (PFL Hub)** a specialized unit of the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) completed an ECE evaluation report titled *"Starting Early: Evaluation of MoFEPT's 100 Early Childhood Education Centres"* in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) and Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) schools (2025). The following recommendations to offset an early systemic learning crisis in schools that are well endowed compared to counterparts in provinces:



- Learning Poverty begins early in ECE and teachers need to take early action backed by the right skills of diagnostics and timely actions for literacy and numeracy.
- The Overloaded Curriculum trap needs to be rationalized to enable students to transition to grade 1 with fundamental cognitive, social-emotional, and language acquisition skills.
- Uneven access to EdTechology in public sector schools due to internet and hardware challenges and teachers' ability to work with EdTech for real time digital learning.
- Deficits in school infrastructure with unreliable electricity and poor sanitation and lack of child friendly spaces especially in rural pockets of ICT.
- 40% of schools resort to multi-grade teaching due to shortage of teachers as well as specialized early years teachers equipped with the right ECCE pedagogies.
- The language disconnects due to multi-lingual/ethnic population whilst the instruction materials are mono-lingual without sensitivity to spoken languages by children becoming an immediate cognitive barrier to foundational Learning.

9. Principles Underlying ECE Programs in Pakistan (NCP ECE 2020)

Schools should be ready to accommodate and cater to the needs of all young learners by providing adequate resources, including sufficient space. Children learn best when:

- The environment provided is secure and enabling, where teachers appreciate their previous experiences and take them forward from where they are.
- A partnership between home and school is valued.
- Adults are interested in them, and the interaction between them is positive.
- They are respected; a positive self-image and high self-esteem are fostered.
- They are motivated to be independent, active learners through firsthand experiences
- They are given opportunities to make choices and decisions which develop their confidence, helping them to take responsibility of their own learning and growth.

10. ECE/ECCE in Sector Plans 2019/2024:

The Education Sector Plans across all provinces devised by the Local Education Group (LEG) and supported by development partners and technical support from Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have been strategically placing ECE as a sub-sector with distinct targets for access and quality since their first iterations in Pakistan in 2013-2018 (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi, 2019) and more recent sector plans 2019/20-2024/25 across the provinces.

ECE- Punjab Education Sector Plan 2019-2024 (pp. 41)

The PESP emphasized improving early childhood education through better retention, increased access and equity. It aims to construct child-friendly, dedicated infrastructure and classrooms; this should also accommodate marginalized and disabled children. According to SED, 7.4 million children aged 3-5 fall under ECE, but only 34.5% of children attend ECE. But there will be higher enrolment as almost 43% children in pre-schools are above age 5. The government's plans to scale by aligning curriculum, teacher training, and materials with multiple policies.

Review of Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020-25 (pg. 50)

The Balochistan Education Sector Plan (BESP) 2020-25 stresses on Early Childhood Education as one of the focus areas for reducing the learning deficiencies among children and getting them ready to attend school. ECE is largely available within the Government with only 14% of the schools having ECE rooms, 7% of teachers trained in the ECE field. ECE is seen as aiding the transition from traditional

Kachi classes to structured and research-driven ECE programs. Skills in pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and socialization are focused on so that early disadvantages suffered by children from poor families are minimized.

The objective of the plan is to increase this availability proportion to 20% through gradual steps taken by implementing changes to the existing curriculum according to the needs of various districts of Balochistan. To help combat late admissions as well as early school dropouts, these steps include community awareness campaigns and making proposals for timely registration. On finance, ECE has been allocated PKR 5.66 billion for recurrent expenditures and 3.09 billion on capital development expenditures over a five-year duration. This clearly shows intent to expand quality ECE initiatives while tackling other plaguing issues within the system.

Suggested Design Review of Sector Plans for ECE

There are multiple Improvements required to efficiently present and analyze ECE trends to have clear and impactful data. These are suggestions for Sector Plans

- Separate and dedicated ECE sections rather than being merged as Kachi to 5. The data should not be merged with primary grades, this approach will ensure ECE indicators would have clearer visibility.
- ECE enrolment data should be presented separately which indicators such as gender, and rural/urban distribution
- For targeted analysis, there should be disaggregated data on 3-5 age groups
- ECE financial allocation and its proportion to the overall budget should be dedicated and clearly represented.
 - There should be a per-child expenditure metric
 - Donor funding and its distribution to be clearly stated
 - Gaps where financing is lacking
- Functional status of ECE classrooms
 - Highlight dangerous ECE structures
 - Schools lacking ECE facilities
 - Availability of ECE resources
- Presence of Teachers
 - ECE-trained and untrained teachers
 - Teacher to student ratios

11. ECE and Governance /SMCs /PTSMCs/PTCs

According to the ELP Systems Policy Brief (ITA), the absence of parents and guardians from School Management Committees represents a significant missed opportunity, given that ECE parents are among the most consistently engaged, visiting schools daily to drop off and collect their children, yet their presence in these forums remains negligible. This gap is not captured in the ASC data collection tool, and parents are rarely consulted in ECE policy, curriculum, or content development.

12. Unified Age Bands for ECE and Primary Sub-sectors in Education in Pakistan

There is an urgency to shift the age bands currently used for Primary, Middle, Matric/Secondary, and Higher Secondary education, in each case moving the range one to two years later, to improve Net Enrolment Rates (NERs) in Pakistan and making room for one or two years of ECE. This evidence comes from the influential PSLM report by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS, 2019–20), which reports

both Gross Enrolment Rates (GERs) and NERs for both age band definitions, consistently finding higher NERs for the older bands. This evidence was also the basis for the recommendation, under the National Education Policy (2009, p.36), for all provinces to adopt age 6 for primary enrolment and Grade 1 and age 4-5 for two years of ECCE or age 5 for one year of ECE.

This shift would also align Pakistan with regional and international practice. In 65 percent of the Asia Pacific region and more than 85 percent of African countries, age 6 is the standard entry point for Grade 1. It is also consistent with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the framework used by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) to track SDG 4 in every country, nationally and sub-nationally.

Addressing this age band conundrum, moving toward the higher, more realistically organized age groups (Grade 1 at age 6, Grade 10/Matric at age 15), is essential for a unified, harmonized national policy across all provinces and federal areas. Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan stipulates 12 years of education, and this has direct implications for ECE/ECCE in provinces currently offering one or two years of pre-schooling. A unified approach would also produce comparable data and trends against both Article 25-A and SDG 4.

Despite this, when data is presented in the consolidated Pakistan Education Statistics (2022–23) by PIE, the ECE sub-sector is barely visible. It is reported in neither enrollment, transition rates, nor facilities.

Table 5. Proposed age bands for schooling

Level	ISCED	Current age band	Proposed age band
Primary	ISCED 1	5–9	6–10
Middle	ISCED 2	10–12	11–13
Matric / Secondary	ISCED 3	13–14	14–15
Higher secondary	ISCED 3	15–16	16–17

Source: PSLM 2019–20 (PBS); National Education Policy 2009, p.36

Findings from the Field



Evidence on ECE in Pakistan

This chapter presents findings, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis integrates evidence from the Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24, Annual School Census, and insights from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted across Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Sindh, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK).

A total of seven FGDs were held with one in each region, with participation from schoolteachers, head teachers, and government education representatives. Through this mixed-method inquiry, seven thematic areas emerged, reflecting key issues influencing ECCE delivery and quality across provinces. These include: (1) Access and Infrastructure, (2) Curriculum Implementation, (3) Teacher Deployment and Training, (4) Classroom Environment and Assessment, and (5) Policy and Financing. The following section discusses each theme in detail.

1. Access and Infrastructure

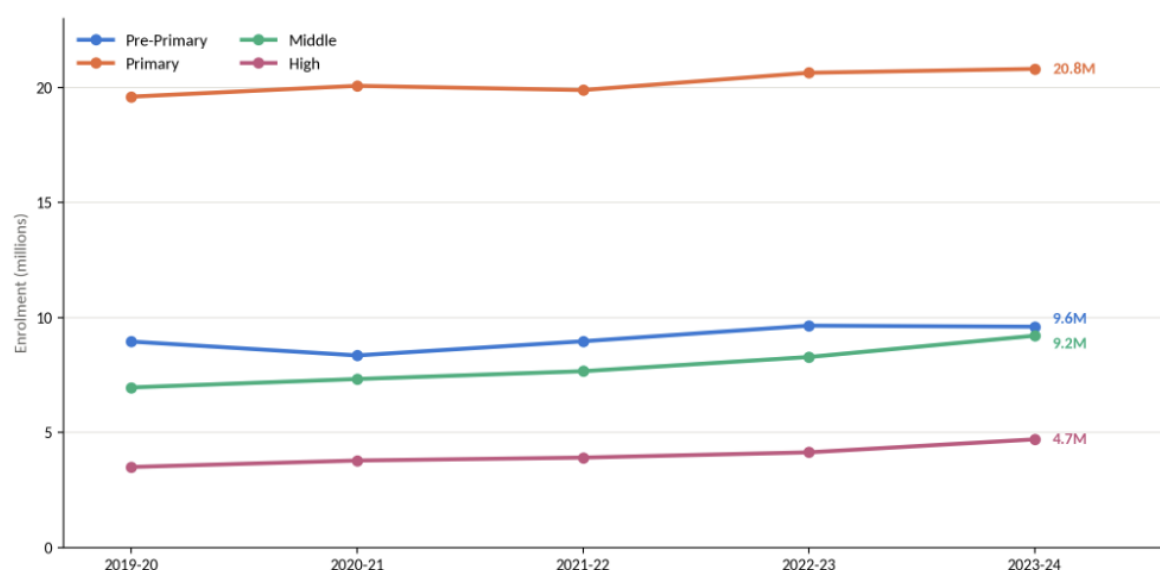
Access to ECCE facilities in Pakistan remains uneven, with pronounced disparities between rural and urban areas. Rural and remote schools continue to face acute shortages of age-appropriate classrooms, furniture, and learning spaces. Focus group discussions revealed that extreme overcrowding is a systemic issue, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan. In many schools, a single teacher is tasked with managing 60 to 70 toddlers in a single, inadequate space. These primary-level institutions often lack the necessary physical boundaries, such as child-friendly washrooms, clean water, and designated play areas, to support pre-primary provision effectively.

Despite recent gains, ECE data remains fragmented and inconsistently reported across Pakistan's education system. It continues to be treated as an extension of primary education rather than a standalone sub-sector, limiting its visibility and accurate tracking. Enrolment data are primarily captured through School Education Departments, yet these often merge pre-primary with primary figures, obscuring participation levels. Data from education foundations such as the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), and Balochistan Education Foundation (BEF) are reported separately and not fully integrated within provincial Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), further restricting a unified national picture.

Household-level surveys such as the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) survey similarly underreport ECE participation, due to definitional ambiguities and limited age-wise disaggregation. Reports such as ASER Pakistan (2023) and the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Systems Research studies (2018–2022) corroborate this invisibility, showing that only a small proportion of children aged 3–5 are enrolled in structured pre-primary programs. This underrepresentation, in both administrative and household datasets, distorts access estimates and weakens planning, budgeting, and accountability for the sub-sector.

The overall state of enrolment in Pakistan across grade levels is a poor one. As shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Enrolment by school stage, 2019-20 to 2023-24

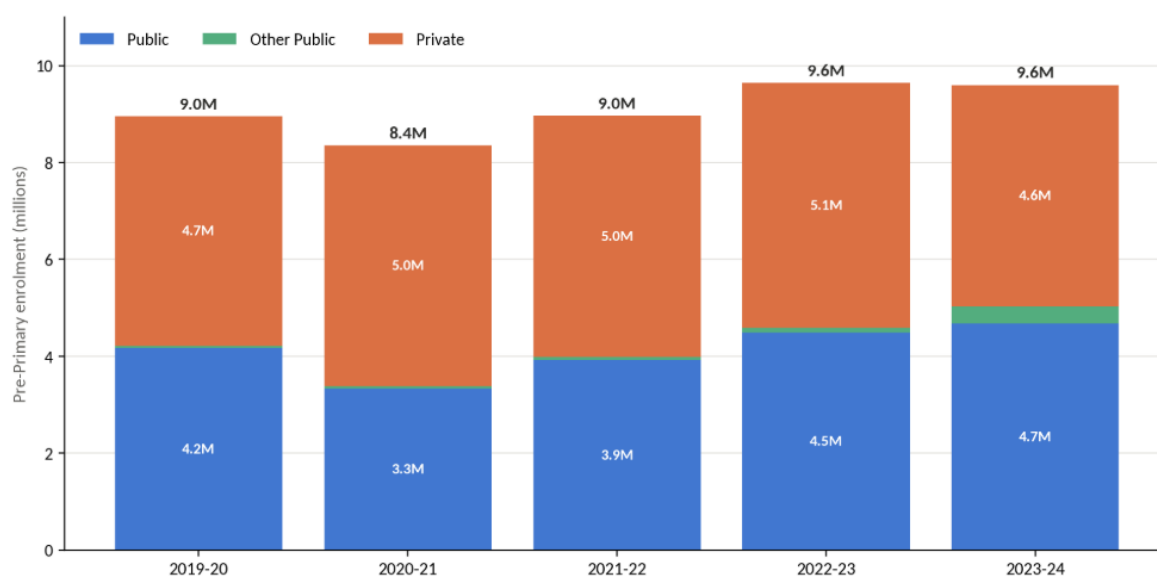


Source: Pakistan Education Statistics, Table 3.1.

Enrollment across all four stages grew over this five-year period, but at different rates, and the gaps between stages reveal where the system loses children as they move up through it. Primary enrollment, the largest stage by a wide margin, grew modestly from 19.6 to 20.8 million. Middle and High school enrollment grew faster in percentage terms, Middle from 7.0 to 9.2 million, an increase of over 30 percent, and High from 3.5 to 4.7 million, an increase of over 34 percent, though both remain far smaller in absolute terms than Primary.

Pre-Primary sits second-largest by 2023-24, at 9.6 million, just ahead of Middle school enrollment and more than double High school enrollment. This places Pre-Primary in a meaningful position within the overall system, it is not a small or marginal stage relative to the rest of basic education. The findings below examine this stage specifically: how its enrollment has moved year to year, how it is distributed across provinces, and what the underlying facility, teacher, and policy data reveal about how well that enrollment is being served.

Figure 7. Pre-Primary Enrolment by sector, 2019-20 to 2023-24



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics, Table 3.1.

Figure 7 shows National Pre-Primary enrollment has grown over the past five years, though not steadily. Enrollment fell from 9.0 million in 2019-20 to 8.4 million in 2020-21, consistent with the disruption expected during the COVID-19 period, then recovered to 9.6 million by 2022-23, before holding roughly flat into 2023-24.

The composition has shifted more than the total. Public sector enrollment grew from 4.2 million in 2019-20 to 4.7 million in 2023-24, while private sector enrollment fell slightly over the same period, from 4.7 million to 4.6 million. As a result, the public sector's share of total Pre-Primary enrollment rose from 47 to 49 percent, a modest but real shift toward public provision over five years.

Table 6. Pre-Primary Enrolment by sector and province

Province	Public	Private	Total	Private share
Punjab	1,933,732	2,466,226	4,399,958	56%
Sindh	1,166,830	920,539	2,087,369	44%
KP	1,202,550	801,791	2,004,341	40%
Balochistan	190,735	101,448	292,183	35%
AJK	114,366	149,270	263,636	57%
ICT	15,933	103,991	119,924	87%
GB	47,035	35,858	82,893	43%
Pakistan	4,671,181	4,579,123	9,250,304	50%

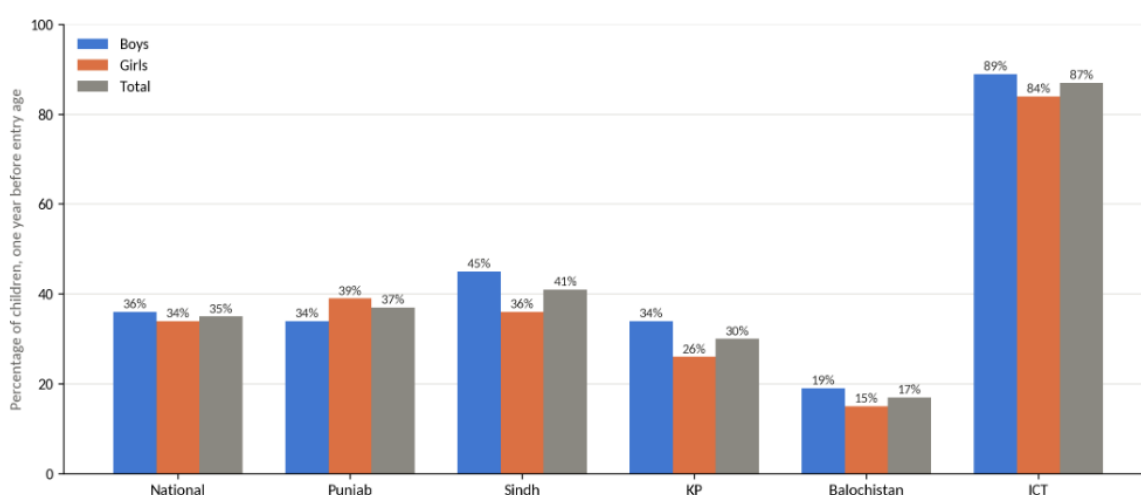
Excludes "Other Public" enrolment (350,294 nationally); no provincial breakdown available for this category.
Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24, Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

The national picture given in Figure 7 masks considerable variation by province as shown in Table 6. Punjab accounts for 4.4 million of the 9.25 million Pre-Primary enrollments shown here (Public and

Private combined), nearly half the total, with private schools carrying the majority (56 percent) of that enrollment. Sindh and KP follow at roughly 2.1 and 2.0 million respectively, each with a public sector majority, the reverse of Punjab's balance.

Private-sector share varies considerably by region. ICT stands out sharply, 87 percent of its Pre-Primary enrollment is private, by far the highest in the country, while Balochistan sits at the other end, just 35 percent private, the most public-sector-reliant province in this data. Nationally, the split is close to even, 50 percent public, 50 percent private.

Figure 8. Learning before primary

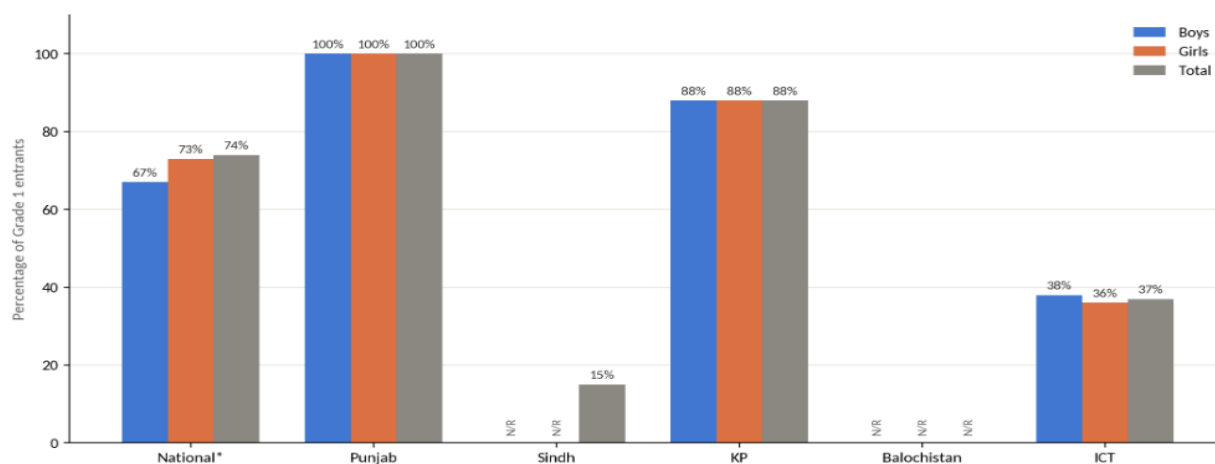


Source: NEMIS 2023-24, DSF Indicator. Measures children one year before official primary entry age, not currently-enrolled ECE population.

Figure 8 shows participation in organised learning among children one year from primary entry age, a different measure from Table 6's enrollment counts, since it captures share of the eligible age group rather than raw numbers enrolled.

Participation in organised learning one year before the official primary entry age stands at 35 percent nationally. Sindh (41 percent) and Islamabad Capital Territory (87 percent) report the highest participation, pointing to comparatively greater access to pre-primary learning in these regions. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (30 percent), Balochistan (17 percent), and Punjab (37 percent) report lower rates by comparison, suggesting an opportunity to strengthen early learning access in these provinces to better support children's school readiness and long-term learning outcomes.

Figure 9. Children entering primary school with ECE experience



* National figures for boys and girls exclude Sindh, where gender-disaggregated data was not reported. N/R = not reported. Source: NEMIS 2023-24, DSF Indicator.

Figure 9 looks at the percentage of new entrants to primary education with prior ECE experience. This stands at 74 percent nationally, with a slightly higher proportion among girls (73 percent) than boys (67 percent). Punjab reports universal ECE participation (100 percent), and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also maintains a high rate (88 percent). Islamabad Capital Territory records a comparatively lower figure (37 percent), while Sindh, where data is only partially available, shows 15 percent participation based on what was reported. Balochistan's data was not reported, though trends in related indicators suggest participation in the province may also benefit from further attention.

Taken together, these two measures point to access gaps that begin before children ever reach a classroom. Figure 8 shows how many children are participating in organized learning in the run-up to primary school, and Figure 9 shows how that participation translates into readiness once children arrive. Where participation is low in the pre-entry year, as in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this tends to carry through into lower rates of ECE experience among Grade 1 entrants, most visibly in Islamabad Capital Territory. Strengthening access to organized learning in the pre-entry year is therefore likely to have a direct bearing on how prepared children are when they begin formal schooling, making this an important entry point for improving both.

Figure 10. Gender Gap in % points

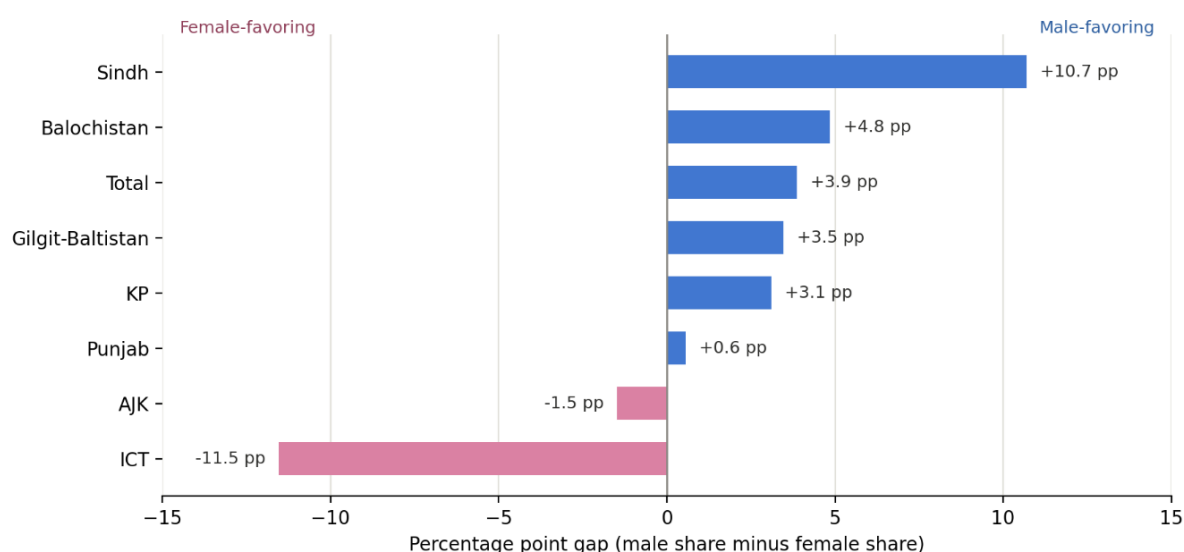


Figure 10 shows the gender enrollment gap by province, expressed as the percentage-point difference between male and female shares of total Kachi/ECE/Prep/Nursery enrollment. Positive values indicate more male enrollment; negative values indicate more female enrollment. ICT is the clear outlier toward female enrollment, with a gap of 11.5 percentage points, the widest of any province. Sindh shows the opposite pattern and the second-widest gap overall, at 10.7 percentage points toward male enrollment. Every other province falls within about 5 percentage points of parity in either direction, with Punjab closest to even at just 0.6 percentage points. Nationally, the gap is 3.9 percentage points in favor of male enrollment, a figure driven disproportionately by Sindh rather than reflecting the pattern in most provinces.

In terms of total enrollment, ICT and Sindh show the widest gender gaps, in opposite directions, ICT toward female enrollment, Sindh toward male. Punjab and AJK show the most balanced total enrollment by gender, with gaps under 3 percent.

Table 7. Standalone Pre-Primary Institution 2019-20 to 2023-24

Sector	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Public	-	-	-	-	-
Other Public	-	-	-	14	19
Private	384	391	406	18	-
Total	384	391	406	32	19

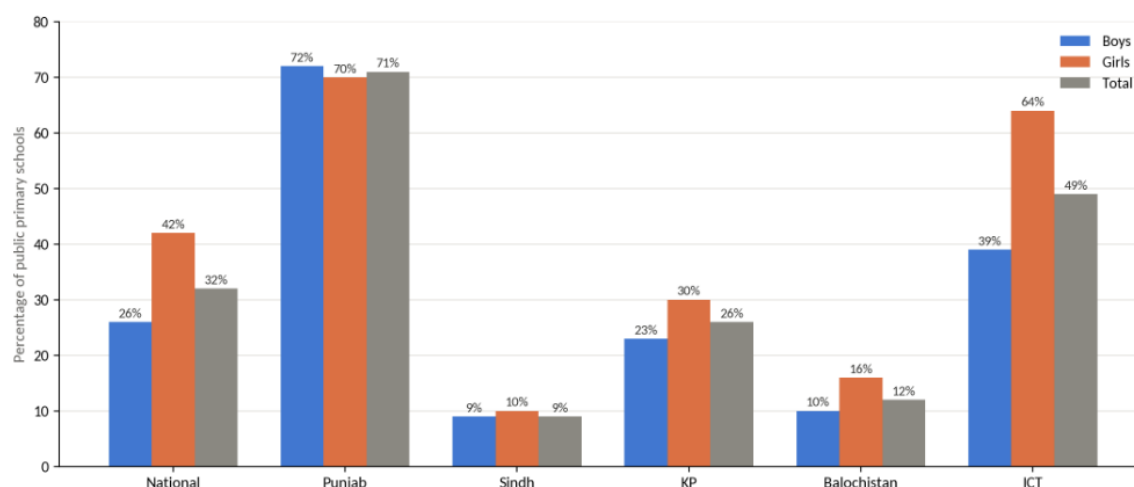
For scale: Pre-Primary enrolment exceeds 9.6 million children in 2023-24, despite only 19 standalone institutions nationally.
Source: Pakistan Education Statistics, Table 2.1.

Pre-Primary does not exist as a distinct institution type within Pakistan's public education system. Public sector Pre-Primary institutions register as zero in every one of the five years shown; ECE and Kachi classes are established as sections within existing Primary, Middle, or High schools rather than as standalone facilities, and EMIS classifies the building under whichever level it was originally registered as.

Private Pre-Primary institutions tell a related story. Their count held around 400 through 2021-22, then collapsed to 18 and finally zero by 2023-24. This is not evidence of private ECE provision disappearing: private Pre-Primary enrollment held broadly stable over the same period, from 5.0 million in 2021-22 to 4.6 million in 2023-24, even as the institution count fell to zero. The mismatch points to reclassification, private Montessori, kindergartens, and playgroups being registered as full Primary or Elementary schools rather than standalone Pre-Primary institutions, not genuine closure.

Because standalone institution counts cannot meaningfully capture Pre-Primary provision under this classification structure, the share of public primary schools offering ECE facilities, 32 percent nationally, is the more accurate measure of physical availability. This is the basis for Figure 11 below.

Figure 11. ECE facilities, including teaching kits in public primary schools by region and gender



Source: NEMIS 2023-24, DSF Indicator.

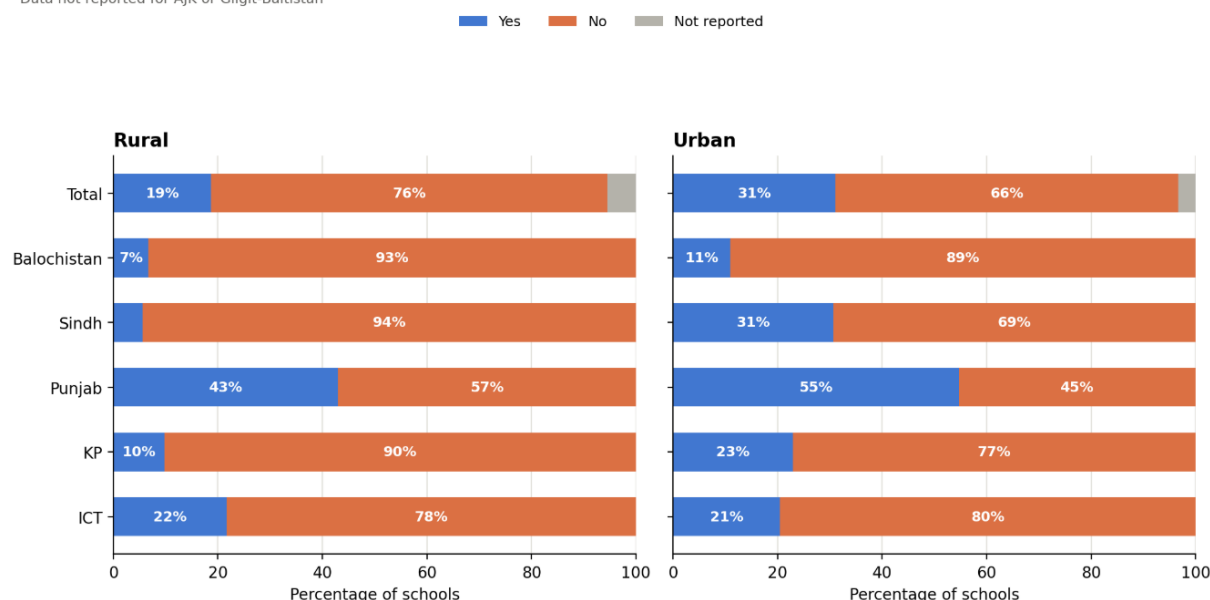
Because ECE is integrated into general schooling rather than built as standalone facilities, physical availability is measured by the presence of designated ECE classrooms/learning kits within the 113,718 public primary schools nationwide. NEMIS data shows the percentage of public primary schools with ECE facilities, including teaching kits, by region and gender. Nationally, 32 percent of public primary schools have these facilities. Applied to the 113,718 public primary schools nationally, this suggests roughly 36,000 schools have ECE facilities and around 77,000 do not, though this is a derived estimate based on the reported percentage, not an independently reported figure.

Punjab records the highest rate at 71 percent, and Sindh the lowest at 9 percent, on a base of 36,225 public primary schools, meaning an estimated 3,000 or so have ECE facilities and over 32,000 do not.

A clear gender disparity exists nationally: 42 percent of girls' primary schools provide ECE facilities compared to 26 percent of boys' primary schools, limiting early learning opportunities for boys. This gap is widest in Islamabad Capital Territory, where 64 percent of girls' schools report having these facilities against 39 percent of boys' schools.

Figure 12. ECE Room Facility by province and location

Data not reported for AJK or Gilgit-Baltistan



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24

In terms of ECE room facilities, Sindh shows the sharpest urban-rural jump of any province, from 5.6 percent rural to 30.6 percent urban, a more than fivefold increase. That's a very different pattern from Sindh's furniture, material, and teacher figures, where rural and urban stayed close together and both stayed severely low. Rooms are the one facility where urban Sindh looks meaningfully better resourced than rural Sindh.

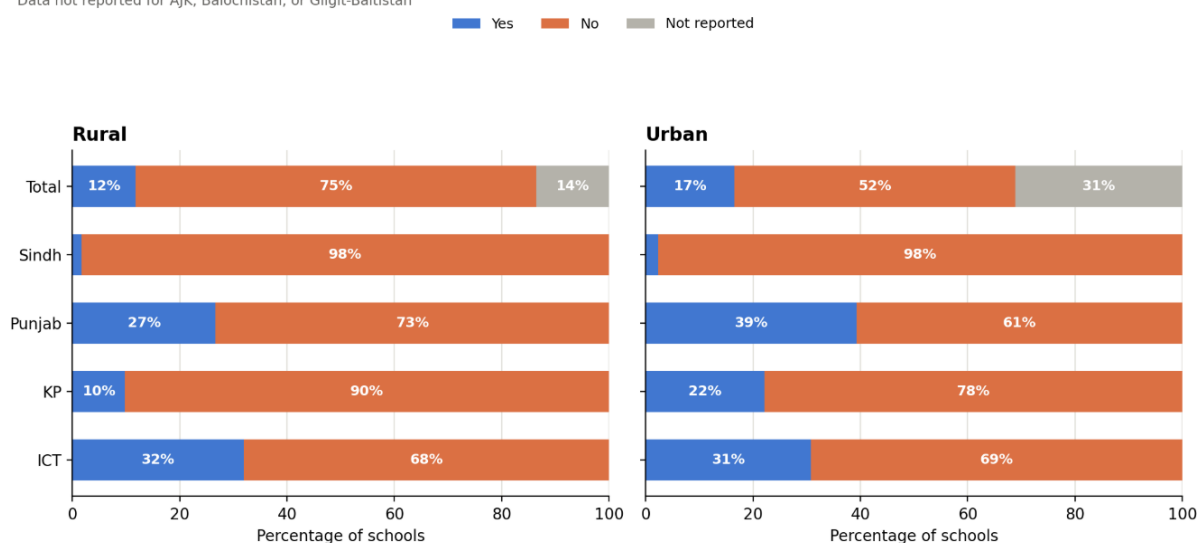
Punjab leads in both settings, 43.0 percent rural and 54.7 percent urban, the only province where urban room availability passes the halfway mark.

Balochistan and KP sit at the bottom of the rural rankings, at 6.7 and 9.8 percent respectively, both below Sindh's already-low rural figure. Balochistan's urban improvement is modest, 10.9 percent, the lowest urban figure of any province and the only one still under 20 percent.

Room availability shows the widest range between provinces and the widest rural-urban gaps within provinces of any ECE facility indicator in this report. Furniture (below), and materials and trained teachers (discussed in later sections), all stay compressed near the bottom almost everywhere by comparison. Rooms are where Punjab and urban Sindh visibly pull ahead of the rest.

Figure 13. ECE Furniture Facility by province and location

Data not reported for AJK, Balochistan, or Gilgit-Baltistan



Source: Annual School Census (ASC) 2023–24

Figure 13 shows furniture availability in ECE classrooms for the four provinces with reported data (ICT, KP, Punjab, and Sindh), by rural and urban location. Sindh has the worst furniture gap in the dataset. Only 1.7 percent of rural schools and 2.3 percent of urban schools report adequate furniture. Sindh's ECE room availability was reported earlier at 5.6 percent rural, so furniture is scarcer than the rooms themselves. Many rooms that exist are sitting empty of furniture.

Punjab performs best overall. Even its strongest figure, 39.3 percent of urban schools with furniture, means most Punjab schools still lack it. KP shows the widest rural-urban split of any province: furniture provision more than doubles from rural (9.8 percent) to urban (22.1 percent). Investment there looks concentrated in urban centers. ICT is the only province where rural and urban furniture availability are nearly identical, 31.9 versus 30.8 percent. Its smaller, more centrally managed school network may explain why the usual urban-rural gap doesn't show up here.

Furniture is also the least-monitored of the four ECE facility indicators tracked in this report. Balochistan has reported data for ECE rooms, trained teachers, and learning materials, but its furniture data is missing entirely. The resource gap and the monitoring gap are stacked on top of each other. Once Balochistan, AJK, and Gilgit-Baltistan are factored in, the true national shortfall is almost certainly worse than the reported 11.8 percent rural and 16.5 percent urban averages.

Key insights from FGDs on access and infrastructure include:

- **Punjab:** ECCE classrooms in the province frequently lack age-appropriate furniture designed for young learners. This deficiency forces children into uncomfortable seating arrangements, which not only hinders their physical engagement but also raises significant hygiene concerns within the learning space.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP):** A primary structural barrier in many schools is the absence of dedicated ECCE classrooms and designated "learning corners." Without these specific physical boundaries and interactive spaces, teachers find it difficult to transition from traditional instruction to the play-based learning mandated by the curriculum.
- **Sindh:** In Sindh, the combination of severe classroom overcrowding and a lack of proper furniture creates a difficult environment for both teachers and students. These issues are

further compounded by poor Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, which together make effective classroom management and student wellbeing nearly impossible to maintain.

- **ICT:** The federal capital has made notable progress by operationalizing approximately 100 ECCE centers staffed with trained personnel. However, FGDs highlighted that these advancements are concentrated in urban areas, leaving a significant gap in rural outreach where facilities remain limited.
- **AJK:** While support from international partners like UNICEF has provided a baseline of resources, the distribution of these materials across the region remains inconsistent. Focus groups noted that some schools are well-equipped while others continue to operate with critical shortages of essential learning materials.
- **Balochistan:** Infrastructure and supply chains in Balochistan rely heavily on NGO interventions rather than integrated public systems. A critical concern raised was the prevalence of "single-teacher schools," which currently constitute 95% of ECCE sites, placing the entire operational burden on a single individual.
- **Gilgit-Baltistan (GB):** The region has seen a rapid quantitative expansion, increasing its ECCE centers from 20 to 120. Despite this growth, FGD participants reported that the utilization of these spaces is inconsistent, and the quality of the physical learning environment varies significantly from one center to another.

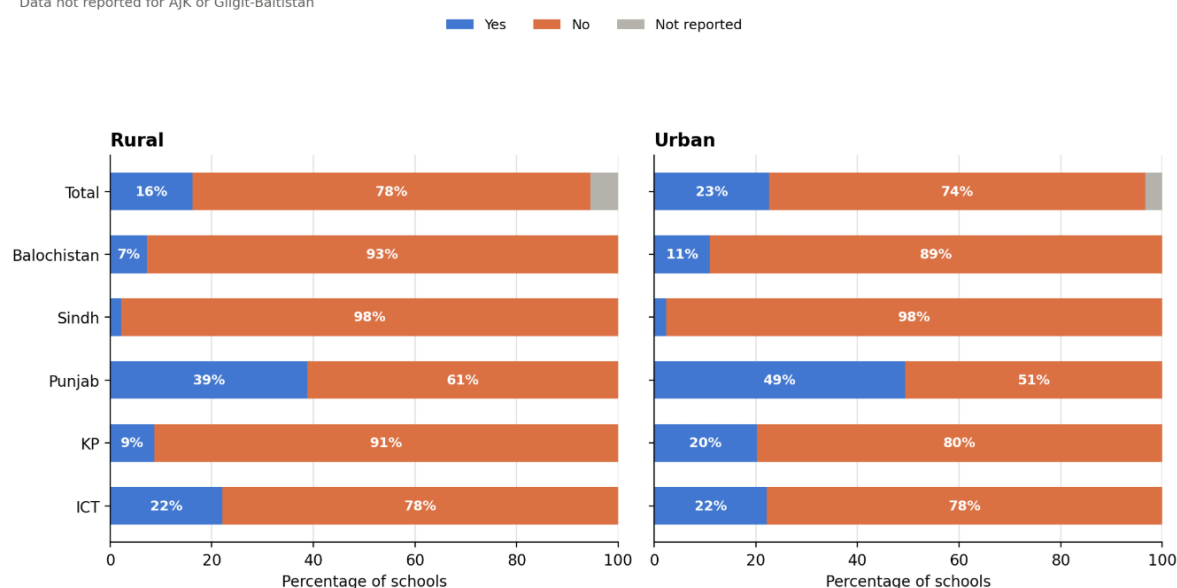
2. Curriculum Implementation

Whilst the curriculum for ECE is strong with perhaps too many SLOs (Student Learning Outcomes), the alignment between children's developmental needs and classroom content remains weak, largely due to inconsistent curriculum implementation, workforce/teachers and material shortages.

In Baluchistan and AJK, limited textbook availability forces teachers to improvise, while ICT has adopted the NCP-ECE 2020 framework supported by instructional guides. The quantitative data presented in Figure 14 further confirm these disparities, showing limited provision of learning materials in Sindh and Baluchistan, especially in rural schools.

Figure 14. ECE Material Facility by province and location

Data not reported for AJK or Gilgit-Baltistan



Source: Annual School Census (ASC) 2023–24

Figure 14 underscores that while Punjab performs comparatively better in ensuring access to ECCE learning materials, provinces such as Sindh and Balochistan continue to experience acute shortages, forcing teachers to rely on improvisation and undermining curriculum implementation fidelity. Teachers in Punjab and KP reported gaps in the alignment of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and inconsistencies in curriculum delivery. Nationally, 78.3 percent of rural schools lack ECCE learning materials, with the shortage most severe in Sindh (97.8 percent). Balochistan remains heavily dependent on NGO-supported materials, whereas ICT and Gilgit-Baltistan have supplementary guides under development.

Provincial insights include:

- **Punjab:** While Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) have been established, they remain poorly understood by frontline educators. FGDs revealed a significant misalignment where the provided teaching materials and daily activities do not consistently support the achievement of these SLOs, leading to fragmented instruction.
- **KP:** Although an enriched curriculum is officially in place, its impact is dampened by insufficient teacher training. Participants noted that without hands-on professional development, teachers struggle with the practical application of the curriculum, often reverting to traditional methods despite the modern framework.
- **Sindh:** Sindh has adopted a formal two-year ECCE model; however, the rollout of supporting resources is incomplete. Focus groups reported that updated instructional materials and workbooks are currently limited to "Year 1," leaving a resource vacuum for the second year of the cycle.
- **Balochistan:** The absence of a province-specific ECCE curriculum has created a significant pedagogical hurdle. In the absence of age-appropriate guides, teachers persist in using Grade 1 and 2 textbooks for preschool-aged children, which fails to meet their specific developmental needs.

- **ICT:** The implementation of the NCP-ECE 2020 in the federal capital is relatively more systematic. This is largely attributed to the use of structured daily instructional guides, which provide teachers with clear, step-by-step pedagogical direction to ensure curriculum adherence.
- **AJK:** A formal curriculum framework exists in AJK, but its application is highly inconsistent. FGD participants pointed to chronic shortages of essential materials as the primary reason why the framework is implemented effectively in some schools while remaining entirely irrelevant in others.
- **GB:** The region faces limited policy clarity regarding the duration of the ECCE cycle and specific age-banding for students. Additionally, while donor-provided kits are available, they remain underutilized because teachers have not received the specific training required to integrate these tools into their daily teaching.

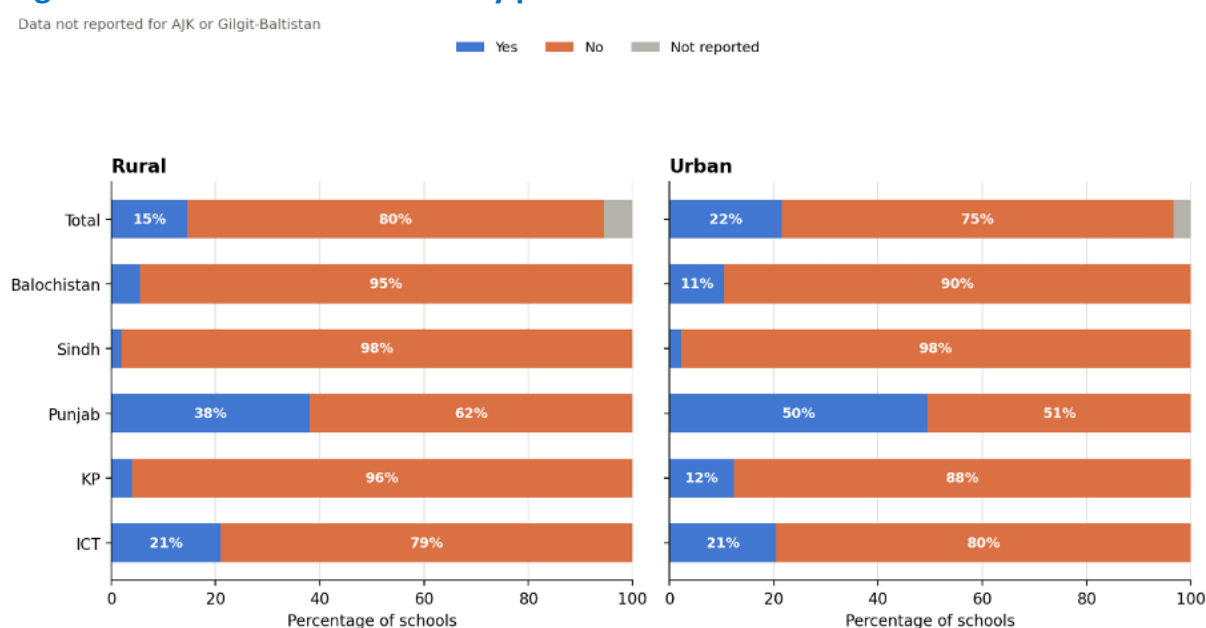
3. Teacher Deployment and Training

A critical bottleneck in ECCE expansion is the shortage of trained teachers. High turnover, multi-grade teaching, and the absence of dedicated support staff (caregivers or assistants) have significantly undermined classroom quality. FGDs revealed that in most rural settings, one untrained teacher manages large ECCE classes, compromising play-based pedagogy and child engagement.

The lack of dedicated ECE cadres in most provinces reinforces the perception of ECE as preparatory rather than developmental, a structural ambiguity that directly affects the consistency and depth of classroom engagement, beyond simply the staffing shortages described above.

Classroom ratios and multi-grade teaching arrangements further constrain developmentally appropriate practice, reducing opportunities for interactive, child-centered learning and formative assessment. Enrolment progress, as shown in Table 6, must be read alongside child-teacher ratios and classroom density: expanded access does not necessarily translate into meaningful learning experiences.

Figure 15. ECE Trained Teachers by province and location



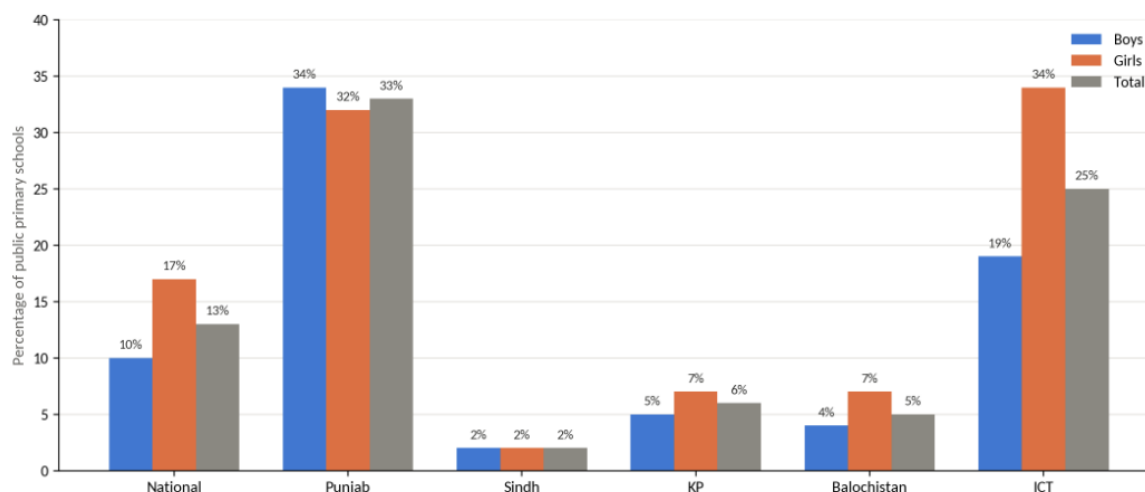
Source: Annual School Census (ASC) 2023–24

Nationally, the availability of trained Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in public schools remains critically low, marked by severe deficits in rural areas and sharp disparities between provinces. According to the Annual School Census (ASC) 2023–24, only 15% of rural and 22% of urban public primary schools nationwide have at least one teacher trained in early childhood pedagogy. This leaves 80% of rural schools and 75% of urban schools operating without specialized early years staff, forcing early learning classrooms to rely on general primary teachers who often lack training in play-based, child-centered instruction.

Provincial performance reveals a wide gap in workforce capacity across the country. Punjab leads in teacher preparation, reporting trained ECE teachers in 38% of rural schools and 50% of urban schools. Meanwhile, Islamabad Capital Territory maintains balanced coverage across geographic divides, with 21% of schools featuring trained ECE staff in both rural and urban settings. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there is a marked urban-rural divide; while rural areas record trained teachers in only 4% of schools, urban provision triples to 12%. Balochistan displays low overall capacity, with 5% of rural schools and 11% of urban schools staffed by trained ECE teachers. Sindh experiences the most acute shortfall nationwide, with trained ECE teacher availability standing at just 2% across both rural and urban public schools, leaving 98% of its primary institutions without qualified early learning educators.

Across all provinces, teacher retention, professional development, and supervision remain weak, underscoring the need for a dedicated ECCE cadre and regular refresher training.

Figure 16. Public primary schools with ECE trained teachers, by region and gender



Source: NEMIS 2023-24, DSF Indicator.

Figure 16 provides more detail to the state of teaching in ECE. Nationally, only 13% of public primary schools have teachers trained in Early Childhood Education (ECE), with notable gender and regional disparities across the country. Girls' primary schools generally report higher rates of ECE-trained teachers than boys' schools, with 17% of girls' schools equipped with trained early learning staff compared to 10% of boys' schools nationwide.

Across regions, Punjab leads provincial provision with 33% of public primary schools having ECE-trained teachers, maintaining a relatively balanced distribution between boys' (34%) and girls' (32%) schools. Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) reports 25% overall coverage, though it exhibits the starkest gender gap in the dataset, with 34% of girls' schools staffed by ECE-trained teachers compared to 19% of boys' schools. In contrast, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (6% total; 5% boys, 7% girls) and Balochistan (5% total; 4% boys, 7% girls) report single-digit availability. Sindh registers the lowest rate in the country, where only 2% of public primary schools' feature ECE-trained teachers across both boys' and girls' institutions, reflecting an acute shortage of specialized early childhood educators.

Provincial insights:

- **Punjab:** In many schools, teachers are still required to manage multi-grade classrooms where ECCE students are grouped with older primary children. This arrangement severely limits the time and specialized attention required for play-based learning, as teachers often prioritize the formal academic requirements of older grades.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP):** The continuity of ECCE programs is frequently undermined by high rates of teacher transfers and a lack of specific qualification requirements for early years educators. This instability prevents the development of long-term pedagogical expertise and disrupts the bond between the teacher and the young learner.
- **Sindh:** While the province has a policy framework for ECCE, implementation is hampered by a lack of support staff. Most classrooms are managed by a single Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) without the assistance of an *aaya* or assistant teacher, and recruitment efforts for these essential roles have remained largely stagnant.

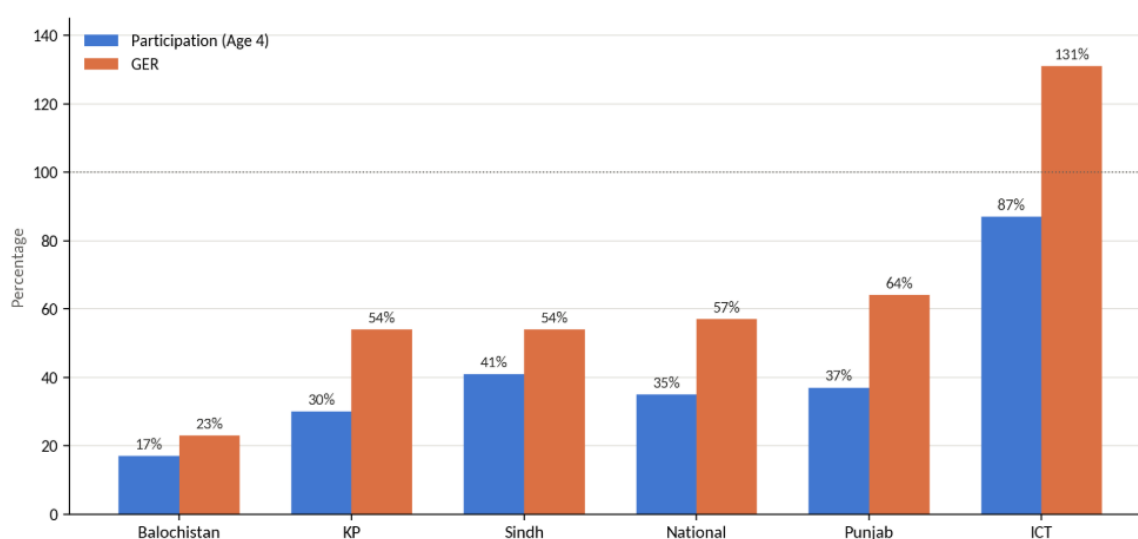
- **Balochistan:** There is a notable absence of dedicated ECCE personnel in the province. Consequently, early years classes are typically assigned to junior teachers who may lack the specific training or interest required for early childhood development, leading to at best a "child minding" approach rather than an educational one.
- **ICT:** It currently lacks a formal, permanent ECCE cadre within its civil service structure; however, it has received a great deal of attention and facility upgradation. Staffing for ECCE/ECE centers is often tied to Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) projects, which results in short-term contractual hiring from non-salary/SMC budgets as a temporary stop gap measure, which threatens the long-term sustainability and institutional memory of the program.
- **AJK:** Consistency in the classroom is frequently interrupted by administrative transfers of trained teachers. Furthermore, focus groups highlighted a critical lack of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities, leaving teachers without the tools to adapt to evolving ECCE standards.
- **Gilgit-Baltistan (GB):** ECCE is primarily delivered by general primary teachers or recruits hired on a stipend basis. Because these teachers often lack specialized ECCE backgrounds and CPD remains irregular, the quality of instruction varies widely and is highly dependent on individual teacher initiative.

4. Classroom Environment and Assessment

International evidence increasingly identifies process quality, the nature of interactions between teachers and children, as the strongest predictor of child development outcomes, more so than structural indicators like curriculum frameworks or teacher training availability alone. In Pakistan, limited data exist on classroom-level pedagogical practices or teacher-child engagement. Observational studies conducted by development partners suggest that even where ECE classrooms exist, instructional practices often remain didactic and worksheet-driven rather than play-based, reflecting a gap between curriculum intent and classroom reality.

A major issue is that of age-inappropriate enrolment within ECE.

Figure 17. Pre-Primary: age-4 participation vs. gross enrolment, 2023-24



Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2023-24.

Gross enrolment at Pre-Primary substantially exceeds age-appropriate participation in every region, most sharply in ICT, where GER reaches 131 percent against 87 percent participation among 4-year-olds, and least sharply in Balochistan, where the two figures sit closest together. This gap is a measure of age mismatch within Pre-Primary classrooms: since ECE and Kachi classrooms routinely enroll children well outside the intended 3-to-5 age range, a large gap means a substantial share of children in the room are older than the classroom is designed for.

For example, Balochistan (17% participation vs. 23% GER): the narrowest gap, 6 points, meaning classrooms are closest to serving their intended age group, though overall access remains the lowest of any region. On the other hand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (30% vs. 54%) has a 24-point gap, reflecting substantial over-age enrollment.

This connects directly to the classroom-ratio and multi-grade findings discussed above. A room mixing 4-year-olds with 7- and 8-year-olds is not simply a headcount problem, it constrains the kind of interactive, child-centered instruction this theme has already identified as difficult to deliver in overcrowded or age-mixed settings. The scale of the gap shown here suggests that age-mixing is not an isolated occurrence but a structural feature of Pre-Primary provision in most regions, with ICT and Punjab showing the widest gaps despite otherwise appearing comparatively well-resourced on other indicators in this report.

Classroom environments are often unconducive to early learning, with limited facilities, overcrowding, and poor monitoring. FGDs in Sindh and Balochistan indicated that formative assessment is weakly implemented, with monitoring in most rural schools limited to basic attendance checks rather than any evaluation of learning or teaching quality.

Monitoring tools such as IDELA, MELQO, MELE, MODEL, P-ECDI, and TEACH-ECE have been introduced in collaboration with development partners to assess child development and classroom quality. Yet, these tools are not institutionalized within EMIS or national quality assurance frameworks, resulting in fragmented evidence.

Provincial insights:

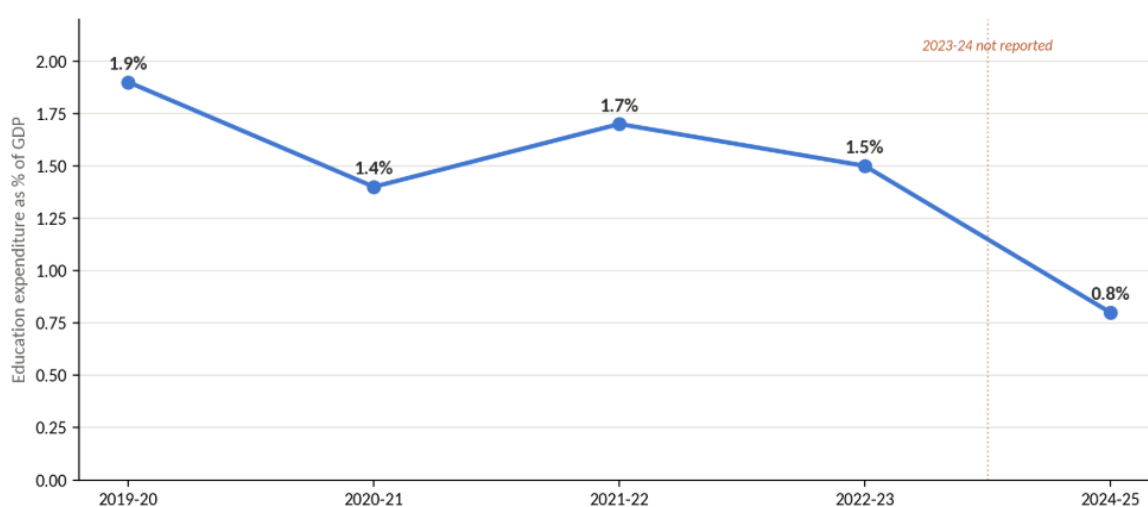
- **Punjab:** In Punjab, while the National Curriculum identifies specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), focus groups highlighted a critical lack of structured formative assessment tools to measure them. Teachers often rely on traditional testing methods that do not capture the holistic development mandated by the curriculum, signaling a need for assessment frameworks that are specifically designed to track progress against early years milestones.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP):** Monitoring in KP is frequently described as irregular or "sporadic," which prevents the establishment of a continuous feedback loop for educators. Furthermore, when monitoring does occur, it often overlooks the implementation of play-based pedagogy, focusing instead on broader school management issues rather than the specific instructional needs of the ECE classroom.
- **Sindh:** Focus groups in Sindh reported that existing oversight mechanisms are heavily skewed toward administrative metrics, primarily student and teacher attendance. This focus on "presence" over "process" means that child learning outcomes and the quality of teacher-child interactions are rarely evaluated, leaving pedagogical gaps unaddressed during routine inspections.

- **ICT:** The federal capital presents a more structured approach to evaluation through the use of daily instructional guides. These guides not only provide a roadmap for teaching but also facilitate ongoing formative assessment, allowing teachers to identify learning gaps in real-time and provide immediate remediation to ensure children remain on track with the curriculum.

5. Policy and Financing

Policy and financing constraints remain the most significant barriers to ECCE institutionalization. FGDs across all provinces highlighted insufficient budgets, weak policy enforcement, and heavy dependence on donor or project funding. Teachers frequently fund classroom materials themselves, particularly in Balochistan and Sindh.

Figure 18. Education Expenditure as % of GDP



Source: Public Financing in Education Report 2022-23, PIE | DSF Indicator.

Education expenditure as a share of GDP has fluctuated since 2019-20, but the most recent figure marks a sharp departure from that pattern. After moving between 1.4 and 1.9 percent across 2019-20 through 2022-23, expenditure fell to 0.8 percent in 2024-25, less than half the 2022-23 level and the lowest point in the period. No figure is available for 2023-24, so the decline cannot be traced year by year, but the direction and scale of the drop are clear regardless.

Table 8. Education's share of total budget, by region (2019-20 to 2022-23)

Region	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Change
Pakistan (National)	13%	13%	12%	11%	-2 pp
Punjab	20%	17%	16%	13%	-7 pp
Sindh	18%	18%	16%	14%	-4 pp
KP	27%	25%	21%	25%	-2 pp
Balochistan	18%	19%	17%	16%	-2 pp
AJK	21%	20%	21%	21%	0 pp
GB	18%	14%	15%	16%	-2 pp
ICT	3%	4%	4%	3%	0 pp

Source: Public Financing in Education Report 2022-23, PIE | DSF Indicator.

Table 8 illustrates how education's share of total budget has declined nationally and in most provinces over this four-year period. Punjab shows the steepest fall, from 20 percent in 2019-20 to 13 percent in 2022-23, a drop of 7 percentage points. Sindh declined more gradually, from 18 to 14 percent. KP fluctuated within a narrower band, dipping to 21 percent in 2021-22 before recovering to 25 percent, close to where it started.

AJK is the one region that held steady throughout, staying within a single point of 21 percent across all four years. GB shows the opposite pattern to most other regions: after an initial decline, its share recovered slightly, ending higher than its 2020-21 low. ICT's share remains small in absolute terms throughout, never exceeding 4 percent of its total budget.

Table 9. Allocation vs. expenditure of education development budget

Region	Original Allocation (billions)	Revised Allocation (billions)	Expenditure (billions)	Utilisation Rate
National	195	161	132	82%
Punjab	49	43	42	98%
Sindh	38	19	15	78%
KP	34	34	13	39%
Balochistan	20	10	9	91%
AJK	2	1	1	100%
ICT	53	54	52	96%

Source: Public Financing in Education Report, PIE 2022-23.

Utilisation of the education development budget varies sharply by region. AJK spent its full revised allocation, and Punjab, ICT, and Balochistan each spent above 90 percent. KP is the clear outlier, utilising only 39 percent of its revised allocation, the lowest rate of any region and less than half the national average of 82 percent.

KP's low utilisation is notable for a specific reason: it is the only region whose allocation was not reduced during revision, the original and revised figures are identical at 34 billion. Every other region absorbed a cut before spending began, yet still recorded higher utilisation than KP did against an unchanged allocation. This points to an implementation or absorption gap in KP specifically, rather than a funding shortfall, since the funds were available and not spent.

Taken together, these three measures point to a financing picture with three distinct pressures rather than one. Overall investment has declined, education spending fell from 1.9 percent of GDP in 2019-20 to 0.8 percent by 2024-25. Within that shrinking total, most regions' share of the budget has also fallen, most notably in Punjab, down 7 percentage points over the same period. And even where funds are allocated, they are not always spent, KP's 39 percent utilization rate shows that funding availability alone does not guarantee delivery.

For ECE specifically, this combination is significant. As noted earlier in this chapter, no province maintains a dedicated ECE budget line, meaning early childhood provision competes for resources within a general education allocation that is itself declining, unevenly distributed, and inconsistently spent. Strengthening ECE financing will likely require addressing all three pressures together: reversing the downward trend in overall investment, protecting education's share of the budget where it has fallen most, and closing the gap between what is allocated and what is actually spent.

Provincial perspectives:

- **Punjab:** A major structural hurdle identified in Punjab is the absence of a consistent budget line for ECCE. Consequently, expenditures are absorbed into the broader primary education budget, which often results in ECCE needs being deprioritized in favor of higher-grade requirements. While international grants (such as the US\$ 47.9 million World Bank grant in 2025) are targeting pre-primary participation, the core provincial budget still lacks a dedicated, standalone allocation for early years.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP):** KP is challenged by frequent teacher transfers and misaligned postings that disrupt the continuity of ECCE delivery. While the 2025 Merit-Based E-Transfer Policy was introduced to bring transparency to these movements, the focus groups noted that the lack of specialized ECE postings continues to undermine the stability of the classroom environment.
- **Sindh:** Focus groups highlighted that the School Management Committee (SMC) funds, while functional, are not specifically earmarked for ECCE. This forces teachers to personally finance classroom materials, such as stationery and play tools, to meet curriculum standards. This "personal financing" model creates significant inequity between schools in high-income and low-income areas.
- **Balochistan:** Governance of ECCE in Balochistan remains heavily dependent on NGO and international donor support, such as the GPE System Capacity Grant (2025-2028) managed by UNESCO. With minimal dedicated government allocation, the sustainability of the system is fragile and subject to the priorities of external grant agents. Participants reported that rural schools generally have no dedicated ECCE-specific budget line, with what resources do exist arriving through NGO or donor channels rather than government allocation.

- **ICT:** The federal capital's ECCE initiatives are largely supported by Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) projects. While these projects are currently aligned with the Federal Learning Policy 2024 and show initial promise, FGD participants expressed concern over their long-term sustainability once project-based funding cycles expire. ICT's PSDP-supported expansion has created positive momentum, yet long-term sustainability remains uncertain once projects end.
- **AJK:** Azad Jammu and Kashmir possesses a formal Education Policy (2021) that recognizes ECCE as a priority. However, the focus group data indicates that inter-departmental coordination and actual ground-level implementation remain weak, resulting in a policy that exists more on paper than in practice.
- **Gilgit-Baltistan (GB):** Despite significant education budget outlays—such as the PKR 1.47 billion allocated for education in the 2025-26 budget—ECCE remains a low policy priority. Focus groups noted that the majority of these funds are directed toward primary and secondary infrastructure, leaving the newly established ECCE centers under-resourced in terms of operational quality.

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Discussion & Recommendations



This study's quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a consistent picture: Pakistan's ECE system is fragmented, under-resourced, and unevenly implemented across provinces, with Sindh and Balochistan facing the most acute gaps and Punjab consistently is ahead of the rest. Addressing this will require the ministries responsible for ECD and ECE, currently working largely in parallel, to build a shared, coordinated strategy for the sub-sector rather than continuing to plan and fund it separately.

Facilities and infrastructure. Rooms, furniture, and material availability are low nationwide, and Sindh and Balochistan report the weakest provision across every indicator, consistent with a persistent national pattern of under-investment in foundational learning environments (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017; Warwick & Rehman, 2020). The chronic inadequacy of child-sized furniture, a basic requirement for developmentally appropriate pedagogy, reflects a broader disregard for the physical needs of young learners in most public-sector settings (Hasan & Saifi, 2017; Jan & Rahman, 2020); as a result, the physical environment for ECE remains largely non-conducive to the play-based, activity-oriented learning essential at this stage.

The FGDs give this shortfall texture: participants described single teachers managing 60 to 70 toddlers in one inadequate room, and in Punjab, a 2018 QAED grant intended for ECCE room development was reported as spent mostly on paint rather than furniture or materials, evidence that funding gaps are not just about the amount of investment but how it is directed once it arrives. Gilgit-Baltistan's rapid expansion, from 20 to 120 centres, shows growth is possible, but FGD participants noted that utilization and quality vary widely across the new spaces, suggesting quantity has outpaced the ability to furnish and staff what's been built. Data gaps in AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, where facility values are frequently unreported, compound the problem: these are not just under-resourced regions but regions rendered invisible in national policy planning (Alvi & Jamil, 2021).

Curriculum and teaching materials. Learning material availability follows the same provincial pattern as facilities (Figure 14), but the FGDs point to a more specific failure: even where curriculum content exists, it isn't reaching classrooms as intended. Punjab teachers described SLOs as poorly understood and the curriculum as overloaded, with kits often incomplete or unused; Balochistan's absence of a province-specific curriculum has left teachers reusing Grade 1 and 2 textbooks with preschool-aged children, a direct developmental mismatch. ICT stands out as a partial exception, its structured daily instructional guides give teachers a concrete pedagogical roadmap, which FGD participants credited with more systematic implementation than provinces relying on curriculum documents alone. This suggests the gap is less about whether a curriculum exists on paper and more about whether it translates into something teachers can actually use day to day.

Teacher deployment and training. The shortage of trained ECE teachers is severe and provincially uneven, and this disparity is directly linked to inconsistent provincial investment in pre-service training programs (Mujahid-Mukhtar & Shah, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019): Punjab reports trained teachers in 38.1 percent of rural and 49.5 percent of urban schools, while Sindh sits at roughly 2 percent in both (Figure 15). This acute rural-urban divide perpetuates a cycle of low-quality early instruction for the majority of Pakistan's children, who live in villages (Aslam et al., 2019; Warwick & Rehman, 2020). Behind these numbers, FGDs describe a system where teachers are frequently untrained for the specific demands of early years pedagogy and are transferred without continuity. In KP, participants described teachers being moved just two to three months after training, leaving ECCE rooms locked and unused.

A single Early Childhood Teacher typically runs Sindh's classrooms with no aaya or assistant, and ICT's ECCE staffing is often tied to short-term PSDP projects/contracts rather than a permanent cadre,

which threatens institutional memory even where staffing levels look adequate on paper. Without pedagogical knowledge specific to early childhood development, teachers inevitably fall back on inappropriate, rote-based methods, nullifying much of the potential benefit of ECE enrollment (Hasan & Saifi, 2017; Jan & Rahman, 2020; Pakistan FLHub 2025).

This burden is compounded by age mismatch within classrooms themselves: gross enrolment at Pre-Primary substantially exceeds age-4 participation in every region, most sharply in ICT (131 percent GER against 87 percent participation), indicating that a meaningful share of children in these classrooms are older than the age band the classroom is designed for, adding to the developmental range a single, often untrained, teacher must manage.

Classroom environment and assessment. Monitoring in most provinces is described as limited to attendance-taking rather than any evaluation of teaching quality or child learning, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan. KP's oversight was described as sporadic, and some KP teachers reportedly avoid using ECCE materials for fear of children damaging them, a finding that illustrates how weak monitoring and weak resourcing can reinforce each other: without an expectation that materials will be used and possibly replaced, teachers respond by protecting rather than deploying what they have. ICT's daily instructional guides again stand out as an exception, functioning as an informal formative assessment tool simply by giving teachers a structure to check against.

International evidence increasingly identifies teacher-child interaction quality, not just structural inputs like curriculum or training availability, as the strongest predictor of child development outcomes; Pakistan currently has almost no institutionalized way to measure this at the classroom level. This is not simply weak monitoring in isolation: quality assurance is comparatively well-established in primary education, while equivalent monitoring for ECE remains far less developed by comparison, suggesting ECE is monitored less because it is prioritized less, not because monitoring ECE is inherently harder.

Enrollment patterns and structural barriers. Enrollment patterns illustrate deep-seated structural and socio-cultural barriers rather than a simple supply shortfall. The higher national average for boys, and the significant gender gap in provinces like Sindh, reflect entrenched norms that deprioritize girls' early education in certain socio-cultural contexts (Halai & Durrani, 2018; Warwick & Rehman, 2020). Conversely, ICT's higher female than male enrollment (Table 6) may reflect the influence of a more educated, urban demographic that places greater value on girls' early schooling (Alvi & Jamil, 2021; Aslam et al., 2019). Balochistan's markedly low participation points to a confluence of extreme geographic remoteness, poverty, and security challenges that suppress demand for ECE services generally (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017; Rahman et al., 2019).

Taken together, these disparities confirm that enrollment is not merely a question of supply, but is intensely mediated by location, gender, and local economic conditions. Underlying much of this study's own data limitations is a further structural ambiguity: Katchi and ECE are not consistently distinguished in provincial data systems, with children sometimes double-counted and confusion persisting around enrollment, teacher compensation, and curriculum across the two categories, consistent with this study's own data gaps in AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan discussed above.

Policy and financing. Every province reported the absence of a dedicated ECE budget line, with ECE funding typically absorbed into general primary education budgets or dependent on donor and NGO support. This financing gap has no clear institutional owner: no formal ECE ministry or department exists at either the federal or provincial level, and the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional

Training functions as a nominal lead without oversight of the devolved provincial ministries actually responsible for delivery. This absence extends beyond financing to basic classification: standalone public Pre-Primary institutions number zero in every year of available data, since ECE and Kachi classes exist only as sections embedded within Primary schools rather than as a recognized institution type in their own right. A sub-sector with no distinct administrative identity is, by construction, difficult to fund, staff, or govern as anything other than an appendage of the level it happens to sit inside.

Financing constraints are not limited to allocation. Even where development funds are allocated, utilisation varies sharply: KP spent only 39 percent of its revised development budget in the latest reporting year, the lowest of any province, despite being the only province whose allocation was not reduced during revision. This suggests an implementation gap distinct from the financing gap, more funding alone will not resolve delivery where absorption capacity is the binding constraint.

These findings sit within a wider pattern of underinvestment in the conditions surrounding early childhood, not just ECE provision itself. National data on the Nurturing Care Framework's five components shows only 30 percent of children receive early stimulation, and just 3 percent have father engagement in early childhood care or two or more books at home, the weakest-performing indicators nationally. These figures, alongside 44 percent of children out of school and 34 percent attending preschool, indicate that even where physical ECE access exists, the surrounding home and caregiving environment often does not adequately support it. This reinforces that ECE outcomes cannot be addressed through the education sector in isolation; they are shaped substantially by conditions, and interventions, outside it.

Broader system context. Beyond ECE-specific provision, nearly 90 percent of Pakistan's public sector schools are rural, yet rural schools are consistently the most poorly resourced, underscoring a broader equity gap in the allocation of quality inputs (Aslam et al., 2019; Warwick & Rehman, 2020). Most schools nationally, especially in rural areas, are primary-level institutions, indicating a system built for basic literacy acquisition rather than holistic early childhood development, which requires dedicated and distinct ECE spaces (Hasan & Saifi, 2017; Jan & Rahman, 2020), a structural constraint consistent with this study's facility-level findings above. These are general schooling-system patterns rather than ECE-specific measurements, and should be read as context for the terrain ECE expansion operates within, not as direct evidence of ECE access or quality on their own.

Synthesis. This study's findings paint a picture of an ECE system in Pakistan with high potential for system equity, but one that is fragmented, opportunistic at best, under-resourced, and inequitable. The intersecting deficiencies in infrastructure, human resources, and equitable access create a scenario where the huge promise of ECE remains unfulfilled for most children, particularly girls, rural populations, and those in disadvantaged provinces like Balochistan and Sindh; emergencies lead to disproportionate setbacks for the sub-sector. Addressing this requires a multi-pronged, equity-focused strategy declaring early years as a clear sub-sector: targeted provincial investments to close facility workforce gaps, a nationwide scale-up of accredited ECE teacher training with a special focus on rural postings, and policies that actively promote girls' enrollment at the right age and the establishment of dedicated ECE classrooms/centres in underserved rural and urban slum areas. Without such targeted reforms, ECE with high potential and scientific evidence to set the system right will continue to survive as an unsustainable appendage, perpetuating inequalities rather than mitigating them. It cannot remain an opportunity diluted and a promise unfulfilled.



ILMpact Swabi ECE Classroom

Recommendations

Policy and Legal Reforms

To address the foundational policy incoherence plaguing ECE, immediate reforms must focus on securing its unambiguous legal status and translating high-level commitments into enforceable action. While Article 25-A of the Constitution provides a broad right to education, its effective application to the early years requires explicit inclusion in provincial Right to Education (RTE) laws. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan must therefore amend their legislation to formally recognize ECE as a distinct, mandatory stage of free and compulsory education, following the precedents set by Sindh (2013) and Punjab (2014).

Concurrently, the aspirational goals outlined in the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2024 and the *Draft National Education Policy (2017-25) * and National ECD Policy Framework (2025) must be operationalized through cost, time-bound national and provincial implementation plans. These plans should define clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms across federal, provincial, and district tiers of governance, ensuring that policy pronouncements move beyond documents to drive tangible resource allocation and systemic change on the ground.

In the context of a policy conversation around competing visions of ECE, with the present government encouraging 0-8 age and certain stakeholders advocating for 3-5 years for ECE, there is a need to align and agree on one age bracket for greater policy clarity.

This should be paired with standardized definitions across Katchi and ECE classes, given this study's finding that these categories are frequently conflated in provincial data systems. Establishing a formal ECE department or unit, whether within MoFEPT federally or as a dedicated wing provincially, would also give the sub-sector an institutional home it currently lacks.

Dedicated ECE Financing

The chronic inadequacy and opacity of funding remain the most significant barrier to expanding and improving ECE. As highlighted in analyses like the World Bank's Spend Better, Spend More report, subsuming ECE allocations within broader primary education budgets leads to resource diversion and a complete lack of financial transparency. To correct this, it is imperative to establish separate, ring-fenced budget lines for ECE at both federal and provincial levels with financial integration. This must be coupled with the development of costed five-year provincial expansion plans modeled on initiatives like the Sindh ECCE Policy (2015) that detail investments needed for dedicated classrooms, learning materials, and teacher recruitment.

Furthermore, recognizing early childhood development as a multi-sectoral endeavor, the education sector should proactively coordinate with health, nutrition, and social protection budgets (e.g., the Sindh Social Protection Delivery System project) to leverage complementary funding streams, thereby creating a more robust and holistic financing ecosystem for the early years.

Securing new funding alone is insufficient without the capacity to spend it. Provinces should establish absorption-focused technical assistance, procurement support, implementation monitoring, and streamlined disbursement processes, so that allocated ECE funds are reliably converted into delivered infrastructure, materials, and staffing rather than lapsing unspent.

Teacher Workforce and Professionalization

The severe shortage of trained ECE educators, most acute in rural KP and Sindh, directly undermines any potential for quality learning. The professionalization of this workforce is a non-negotiable priority. A critical first step is the formal establishment of a dedicated ECE teacher cadre across all provinces, building on Sindh's existing model. This cadre must have distinct qualification requirements that mandate specialization in early childhood development and pedagogy. Pre-service teacher education programs (B.Ed., ADE) and in-service continuous professional development (CPD) must be comprehensively reformed to move beyond theoretical knowledge and equip teachers with practical skills in play-based, inquiry-led, and child-centered methodologies as envisioned by the National Curriculum of Pakistan (NCP) or SNC.

Targeted recruitment strategies, especially for female teachers in underserved rural areas, are also essential to address the stark gender and geographic disparities in current staffing. Formal cross-provincial knowledge exchange mechanisms, structured opportunities for KP, Balochistan, and other lagging provinces to study Sindh's dedicated ECT cadre and Punjab's caregiver mandate directly, would accelerate this professionalization rather than requiring each province to develop workforce models independently.

Inter-Sectoral Coordination

Child development is inherently holistic, yet Pakistan's service delivery remains fragmented across siloed ministries. Effective ECD requires integrated action. To break down these silos, formal inter-departmental coordination mechanisms such as steering committees co-chaired by senior officials from Education, Health, Nutrition, Social Welfare and Social Protection must be established at provincial and district levels. These bodies should develop joint operational plans to pilot and scale integrated service delivery models, such as "one-stop shop" ECD centers that combine preschool education, health screenings, nutritional support, and parenting guidance. Success should be measured through a unified set of child well-being indicators, enabling joint monitoring and ensuring that interventions from different sectors are synergistic and collectively focused on improving outcomes for the whole child, particularly the most marginalized.

Inclusive ECE for Vulnerable and Marginalized

To ensure equitable access to quality ECCE in line with SDG 4.2, Pakistan must adopt an inclusion-focused framework that prioritizes children facing compounded vulnerabilities, including poverty, emergencies/climate change, disability, gender-based exclusion, displacement, and language marginalization. This requires institutionalizing disability screening and early identification mechanisms within ECCE centers, equipping teachers with inclusive pedagogy training, and ensuring classrooms are physically accessible and developmentally responsive to diverse learning needs. Provincial governments should integrate disability and displacement-disaggregated indicators within EMIS to improve planning and targeted resource allocation.

In parallel, flexible enrollment policies through diverse delivery mechanisms should be introduced for refugee, internally displaced, and undocumented children to prevent exclusion due to administrative barriers. Mother-tongue instruction in early years, recruitment of female teachers in conservative regions, and community-based ECCE models in underserved rural and peri-urban areas can further reduce socio-cultural barriers. Targeted subsidies or conditional cash transfers for low-income families, alongside structured parental awareness campaigns, would strengthen demand for early learning among marginalized communities.

Embedding inclusivity within financing, monitoring, and teacher development systems rather than addressing it through short-term projects will be essential to transforming ECCE from a selective service into a universal foundation for lifelong learning.

Monitoring, Data, and Assessments

The systemic data gaps obscuring the true state of ECE, as evidenced by the "Not Available" reporting for regions like AJK, must be closed to enable evidence-based policy and accountability. Provinces must be mandated and supported to strengthen their Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) to capture and report disaggregated ECE data on enrollment, facilities, and teacher qualifications reliably. Beyond inputs, tracking outcomes is vital. The country should systematically adopt standardized, low-stakes tools like IDELA, MELQO, or PAL-ELANA to assess school readiness at the start of Grade 1. This data should be used formatively to inform teaching practices and program improvements, not for high-stakes evaluation. Finally, the ECCE Assessment Framework developed by the National Curriculum Council should be fully operationalized to provide a coherent national approach for monitoring children's holistic developmental progress, thereby creating a comprehensive data ecosystem that tracks both access and quality in the early years.



The State of Early Childhood Care and Education in Pakistan

Conclusion: A Crossroads for Pakistan's Future

Pakistan stands at a critical juncture in its educational development. The findings of this research paint a paradoxical policy rich but overall weak portrait of an Early Childhood Education (ECE) system on ground characterized by profound inequity, systemic neglect, fragmentation and unrealized potential. Chronic shortages of facilities, a dire lack of dedicated cadre, trained teachers, and deeply entrenched geographic and gender disparities in access collectively form a significant barrier to national progress for an age group that needs urgent support for capabilities that support sustained lifelong learning. These deficiencies are not merely administrative failures but represent a fundamental breach of the constitutional promise of Article 25-A and the nation's commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which calls for quality pre-primary education for all (United Nations, 2015). The evidence is unequivocal: without a foundational commitment to the holistic development of its youngest citizens, Pakistan's aspirations for improved human capital, social cohesion, equity and economic growth will remain perpetually out of reach. The compounding challenges of rising poverty, regional disparity, recurrent climate change emergencies, low basic services and cultural barriers further exacerbate this foundational crisis, creating a cycle of disadvantage that begins long before a child enters primary school.

This analysis demonstrates that the problems of ECE are not incidental but are structurally embedded within the policy and governance frameworks of the education sector itself. While progressive policies such as the *Sindh ECCE Policy (2015)*, *Punjab ECCE Policy (2017)* and the national *Single National Curriculum (SNC)/NCP 2020* provide a forward-looking blueprint, their implementation remains fragmented and under-resourced. Majority of the recent Foundational Learning Policies across the Federation (2024) argue for a unified approach to ECE and Foundational primary learning. The consistent subsumption of ECE budgets within primary and elementary education allocations, as critiqued in reports on public financing, ensures that early years' programs remain the first to be compromised in times of fiscal constraint (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2024; Baron et al., 2023). Consequently, the system fails to translate policy intent into classroom reality, leaving provinces and districts far behind and uneven, thus perpetuating a landscape where the quality of a child's start in life is predominantly determined by their birthplace, gender, geography, and family income.

Therefore, the path forward demands more than incremental adjustments; it requires a paradigmatic shift in how Pakistan values, funds, and delivers early childhood services beginning from the ease of access to a fundamental entitlement of a birth registration certificate. The recommendations presented, center on legal reform, classification of ECE as a clear education sub-sector, backed by distinct data regimes, dedicated financing, workforce professionalization, inter-sectoral coordination, and robust monitoring within an overall child rights, protection and care lens. Only a comprehensive approach for the first steps of human development will constitute an integrated and actionable roadmap for this transformation. First, anchoring ECE firmly within the legal framework of provincial Right to Education laws, is a non-negotiable prerequisite for accountability. Second, the establishment of ring-fenced, transparent budget lines for ECE/ECCE is essential to break the cycle of underinvestment, lack of predictability and enable the systematic development of infrastructure, workforce and learning materials. As the World Bank (2023) argues, Pakistan must not only *spend more* but must critically, learn to *spend better*, directing resources to the foundational stage with the highest long-term return on investment throughout the lifecycle.

Third, the professionalization of the ECE workforce is the single most critical lever for improving quality. The creation of a dedicated teacher cadre with specialized training in child-centered, play-based pedagogy must become a national priority to replace the prevalent culture of rote learning.

Fourth, recognizing that a child's readiness to learn is inseparable from their health and nutritional status, and social protection breaking down sectoral silos is imperative. Formal coordination mechanisms between education, health, and social protection departments can foster integrated models of service delivery, ensuring that interventions are synergistic and holistic (Samuel Hall, 2023). Finally, a culture of evidence-based decision-making must be fostered through strengthened data systems and the adoption of standardized tools to measure school access, readiness and developmental outcomes, moving beyond mere enrollment figures to truly assess quality and impact.

Investing in ECE is the most strategic investment Pakistan can make to address the Education Emergency with timely and strong early learning. It is a proven catalyst for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, reducing gender inequality, improving the foundations of foundational learning, primary school retention and performance, and building the cognitive and socio-emotional learning capabilities of a productive, resilient citizenry (SELD, 2024, Britto et al., 2017). The cost of inaction measured in continued high rates of stunted human capital, learning poverty, and wasted potential is far greater than the cost of implementation. The time for isolated pilot projects and rhetorical commitment without definitive space in education systems, workforce planning and budgets has passed. The moment demands bold, concerted, and sustained action from federal, provincial and area governments that supports system strengthening, supported by civil society, industry and development partners. By embracing a comprehensive reform agenda centered on equity and quality, Pakistan can transform its ECE system from a neglected peripheral education space to a powerful engine of national development as a clear sub-sector it is meant to be, ensuring that every child, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity to fulfill their innate potential.



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Annex:

Age Bands Conundrum in Pakistan -

Shifting Age Bands Pre-Primary to Secondary in Pakistan

There is an urgency to shift Age Bands currently used for Primary from 5-9 to 6-10 years; Middle from 10-12 to 11-13 years; Matric/Secondary from 13-14 to 14-15 years and Higher Secondary from 15-16 to 16-17 years for improved Net Enrolment Rates (NERs) in Pakistan. The evidence of higher NERs for these age bands is drawn from the influential PSLMs report by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) 2019-20. The report cites both age bands for Gross Enrolment Rates (GERs) and NERs, with a consistently higher NER for the higher age bands. This evidence was the basis for the recommendation under the National Education Policy (2009-pg.36) for all provinces to use Ages 6-10 for primary education & Age 6 for Grade 1 for enrolment.

Furthermore, in 65% of the Asia Pacific, 6-10/11 years is the operative Age Band, beginning grade 1 at age 6 (In Africa in more than 85% of countries). This is aligned with the levels given in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) that facilitates the tracking of SDG 4 collected in every country (nationally and sub-nationally) by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). The 8 ICSED levels cover: ECCE = ISCED 0; Primary=ISCED 1; Lower Secondary/Middle = ISCED 2; Upper Secondary=ISCED 3; Post-Secondary = ISCED 4; Tertiary, Bachelor and Masters = ISCED levels 4,5,6 and 7 and Doctoral/PhD = ISCED No. 8. (See UIS study 2021) ²

It is imperative to address the Age Band conundrum for the country towards the higher age groups that are more realistically organized (Grade 1 at age 6 and Grade 10 /matric at age 15). Article 25 A of the constitution of Pakistan has stipulated 12 years of education. This has implications for ECE/ ECCE in provinces opting for 1 or 2 years of pre-schooling.

The Age Band Conundrum for Pre -School or ISCED 0, Primary -ISCED 1, Middle ISCED 2 and Secondary ISCED 3 Net Enrolment Rates has to be addressed urgently for a national unified and harmonized policy across all provinces and federal areas. This will render comparable data and trends for both Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan and SDG 4.

²/<https://isced.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2021/05/UIS-ISCED-DiagramsCompare-web.pdf>

Table A: Higher Net Enrolment Rate (NER) if 6-10, 11-13 & 14-15 years Age Bands Adopted Across Provinces

PSLM Report PBS - Data for Sindh 2013-2020				
Primary Age Bands	2019-20	2018-19	2013-14	Avg. Difference
5-9	45%	48%	48%	9% points
6-10	55%	58%	56%	
Middle Age Bands				13% points
10-12	18%	16%	17%	
11-13	32%	30%	29%	
Secondary Age Bands				10% points
13-14	9%	10%	11%	
14-15	22%	21%	18%	

PSLM Report PBS - Data for Punjab 2013-2020				
Primary Age Bands	2019-20	2018-19	2013-14	Avg. Difference
5-9	56%	60%	64%	11% points
6-10	70%	73%	72%	
Middle Age Bands				16% points
10-12	25%	27%	25%	
11-13	41%	45%	39%	
Secondary Age Bands				14% points
13-14	16%	19%	17%	
14-15	30%	33%	31%	

PSLM Report PBS - Data for KP 2013-2020				
Primary Age Bands	2019-20	2018-19	2013-14	Avg. Difference
5-9	49%	50%	54%	15% points
6-10	65%	66%	67%	
Middle Age Bands				18% points
10-12	19%	20%	20%	
11-13	38%	39%	37%	
Secondary Age Bands				16% points
13-14	8%	9%	9%	
14-15	25%	25%	26%	

PSLM Report PBS - Data for Balochistan 2013-2020				
Primary Age Bands	2019-20	2018-19	2013-14	Avg. Difference
5-9	46%	33%	39%	7% points
6-10	56%	40%	44%	
Middle Age Bands				9% points
10-12	15%	11%	12%	
11-13	26%	20%	22%	
Secondary Age Bands				7% points
13-14	5%	6%	5%	
14-15	14%	12%	11%	

Note Highlighted Column of PSLMs 2019-20 NERs

Implications for the ECE/ECCE Age Band:

Adopting the upper Age Band means 1 year of ECE will cover 5 years & 2 years of ECCE 4-5 years.

ECE-Program Initiatives	Focus/Description	Implementing Organization	Link
BUNYAD (PHCIP)	Refurbishing ECE classrooms, providing ECE kits, training teachers in Punjab.	Government of Punjab with World Bank Support	Link
Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC)	Developing the ECD workforce, policy advocacy, and capacity building nationwide.	PAFEC	Link
Aga Khan Early Childhood Development Program	Enhancing ECE services with over 144 units across Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Chitral.	Aga Khan Development Network	Link
Early Childhood Learning Center (ECLC) by FES Pakistan	Providing safe, nurturing early learning spaces in Chitral for marginalized communities.	FES Pakistan	Link
Early Childhood Education Program by Ali Institute	Equipping teachers with ECE-specific training and child development knowledge.	Ali Institute of Education	Link
ECCE Project by Aga Khan University (AKU-IED)	Improving ECE through research, teacher training, and resource development in Pakistan.	Aga Khan University - Institute of Education	Link
Sindh Early Learning Enhancement through Classroom Transformation (SELECT)	Improving literacy and retention through upgraded school infrastructure in Sindh.	World Bank and Sindh Education Department	Link
Actions to Strengthen Performance for Inclusive and Responsive Education (ASPIRE)	Expanding education for OOSC and in school at risk across the Federation- All provinces & areas.	World Bank	Link
Balochistan Education Project (BEP)	Enhancing access to education in conflict-affected areas with a focus on girls' education.	World Bank and Government of Balochistan	Link
KP-HCIP	Establishing ECE centers in KP to support school readiness and foundational skills.	World Bank and Government of KP	Link
GRADES projects (Getting Results: Access and Delivery of Quality Education Services)	School Access Expansion- Infrastructure, Foundational Learning, ECCE Models for School Readiness, PPPs, System Strengthening Data and Assessment and Sectoral Strategic Alignment	Punjab and Balochistan School Education Depts. with World Bank support	Link Link

Transformation in Access, Learning, A major focus on ECE & FL in Punjab GPE transformation grant Equity and Education Management)

TALEEM Punjab - [Link](#)

Sindh Learning Program (SLP) [Link](#) A major focus on ECE & FL GPE Transformation grant

ILMpact -GOAL A core component on ECE and SEL KP/Punjab by FCDO [Link](#)



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