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PROBLEMS FACED BY CAREGIVERS DURING IMPLEMENTATION OF KEY LEARNING AREAS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) encompasses a comprehensive approach to the care and education of young children. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is seen as a vital element in driving Pakistan's advancement towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) vision 2030. The quality of a child's early learning experiences has a substantial influence on their preparation for life. The pre-school years are important for a child's education, and the subsequent success and holistic development in later schooling rely on this early period. Caregivers have a key role in fostering the fundamental aspects of child welfare. They support and assist teachers in all kinds of classroom activities. The major objective of this study was to examine the problems faced by ECCE caregivers in addressing key learning areas in ECCE programme in the Punjab, Pakistan. Qualitative approach was used to explore their potential challenges and their tentative solutions. The population of the study was the caregivers, from all ECCE schools in Punjab and multistage sampling technique was used for sample selection. Data were collected through qualitative research design. Semi structured interview protocol was developed to explore the problems in addressing key learning areas in ECCE setting and suggest the practical solutions to problems. It was concluded that the resources offered were insufficient to carry out the ECCE program effectively. There is dire need to have policy dialogue among all stakeholders to develop consensus to allocate and integrate available resources for improvement of ECCE schools in the Punjab.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), holistic development, key learning areas, caregivers.

Introduction

Every child has the right to grow up in an environment that appreciates the children and offers a safe space for them in society. Children have needs, rights, and intrinsic worth that must be acknowledged and supported because they are considered as the 'present' and the 'future' of every nation (Daly, 2020). For optimum development, children need to be nurtured and educated both inside and outside of their families from the time of birth onwards (Likhar et al., 2022). For the sake of future generations, care must be taken with regard to their health, nutrition, education, and the psychosocial development of young children (Pakistan, 2020).

Reportedly, 250 million children over the globe are unable to attain their developmental potential in the first five years of life. The majority of these children live in lower and middle income nations, including Pakistan (McCoy et al., 2022). Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is being acknowledged as one of the best tools of children's holistic development (Team et al., 2020). It is widely acknowledged and is the subject of special attention among all nations. The ECCE is increasingly recognized as the best investment in human capital and a crucial component of sustainable development (Taimur & Sattar, 2020).

The significance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) for ongoing education delivery has been validated by several international frameworks. An illustration of this is the Education for All (EFA) program, which was first implemented in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 (Rauf, 2021). The Dakar Framework of Action 2000, which prioritized the growth and improvement of ECCE, is another important statement on the topic. In addition to this, "inclusive, relevant, quality Education for All" was the topic of cooperation among the E-9 countries (Chelebela, 2022).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were unveiled in 2025, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were established in 2000, both prioritized early childhood care and education (Loomis & Akkari, 2023). Regardless of a person's gender, geographically, or other characteristics, Goal 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for universal access to high-quality childhood care and education (Esteinou, 2020). To accomplish the objective of comprehensive development, the government of Punjab and Pakistan launched the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program. Its goal was to enhance kids' overall growth and wellbeing (Kaur, 2023) (Zadi et al., 2021). Through this program, children are given the opportunity to boost their self-esteem and gain the confidence to take control of their own education and development (Engida, 2021).

ECCE is becoming more and more recognized as one of the best investments in human capital and a major force behind sustainable development (Negi & Shukla, 2024). The Pakistani government released the Single National Curriculum (SNC) for Early

Childhood Care and Education 2020. This curriculum aims to improve children's overall well-being and ensure the ideal conditions for their growth in a caring, kid-friendly, and inclusive setting by giving them the flexibility and option to experience independence in a safe supervised, and healthy environment. In order to achieve the goal of children's holistic development, the Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2020 focused on seven major leaning areas (KLAs), also referred to as important learning outcomes for pupils. These core serve as the foundations for all of the ECCE program's instructional activities (Council, N. C. 2020).

The government of Pakistan, and subsequently the government of Punjab, initiated the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program, which aimed at improving the holistic development and well-being of children. In this programme, children are provided with the opportunity to make decisions that boost their self-esteem and empower them to take responsibility for their own education and development. To achieve the desired level of children's development, the government decided to hire caregivers for ECCE schools. Caregivers have a key role in fostering the fundamental aspects of child welfare. They support and assist teachers in all kinds of classroom activities. The caregivers are imparting key roles in the classroom, and are directly connected with children, and better understand how to cope with the basic needs of the children and what the shortcomings are therein.

Neuro-scientific research consistently highlights the importance of secure attachments in the early years. In addition to creating a safe foundation from which our schools can investigate and interact with the outside world, primary caregiving forges a solid, trustworthy relationship between teacher and student. Caregivers can develop responsive connections that are sensitive to the unique needs and cues of each child by providing primary care. Primary caregiver enables the development of a learning path that considers each child's particular requirements by tailoring educational opportunities to each child's particular strengths and challenges.

One of the main duties of a caregiver is to promote fundamental principles of child welfare. The caregivers not only play significant responsibilities in the classroom but also have a tight relationship with the children, making them better able to handle their basic needs and see any flaws. The results of the interview with the caregivers regarding their support and help with the ECCE instructions in the classroom are shown in this part. Finding out how much the caregivers assist and support the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) instructors in the classroom was the of the interview. The government has identified early childhood care and education (ECCE) as one of the most important strategic sectors for educational growth. Punjab's public schools have been using the ECCE curriculum since 2013. The entire ECCE process is built upon the seven Key Learning Areas (KLAs) established under the Single National

Curriculum (SNC) 2020. This study aims to comprehend the problems faced by ECCE caregivers in Punjab, Pakistan. In order to achieve this, the study explore how caregivers, whose roles have always been seen as extremely important in ECCE setting, feel about the effectiveness of ECCE in ECCE schools.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study were:

1. To examine the challenges faced by ECCE caregivers while addressing key learning areas in the ECCE program.
2. To suggest measures for addressing the challenges faced by ECCE caregivers.

Research Questions

The study's research questions were as follows:

1. What kind of problems faced by ECCE caregivers in addressing key learning areas?
2. What measures can be taken for addressing problems faced by ECCE caregivers?

Research Methodology

The researcher used qualitative research approach. During this stage, surveys were conducted using qualitative method (semi-structured interviews with caregivers).

The population is all from in Punjab. Central Punjab was the target population, and Sargodha Division was the accessible population of the study. The sample was 260 caregivers who were randomly selected. The semi-structured interviews with the caregivers were done in order to gather qualitative data.

Table.1 Analysis of Interview-based Data from Caregivers regarding Key Learning Areas

Following them were drawn from data

S.No	Statements	Yes	No
1	Training of caregivers in ECCE	f=170 (65%)	f=90 (35%)
2	Helping children in basic needs to keep good hygiene	f=190 (73%)	f=70 (27%)
3	Financial constraints	f=210 (81%)	f=50 (19%)
4	Addressing the Problems while performing duties	f=219 (84%)	f=41 (16%)

Training of ECCE Caregiver

The objective of training is to improve the capacity of caregivers to increase their understanding about Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). After the training, caregivers are expected to be skilled enough for the very purpose and supposed to have a positive change in their behavior towards the holistic development of children. Data reveal that the majority of caregivers ($f=170$ out of 260, 65%) said that the training they received was useful for carrying out the ECCE program successfully.

A caregiver from an urban area expressed that;

"It is important to provide us with professional training in child care. By enhancing our skills through training, we may be able to foster improvement in children's behavior. They may become more motivated to communicate their issues with us rather than resorting to fighting and shouting." (Respondent-16: Caregiver (female/urban))

Nonetheless, a large number of the caregivers ($f=90$ out of 260, 35%) confirmed that the QAED's training is inadequate. Caregivers had the belief that a unified training program would promote a shared understanding and enhance their sense of competence and satisfaction.

Talking about the need of a comprehensive training programme, one of the caregivers stated:

"We all desire a training program, preferably not online but physically, that can accurately identify our mistakes. We genuinely need this because we have never received any training. We want to acquire the skills to effectively assist these children in all aspects. Perhaps if they behave correctly, we can also experience a sense of relief." (Respondent-50: Caregiver (female/urban))

Meeting the basic needs of children

Talking about the basic needs, the majority of caregivers ($f=190$ out of 260, 73%) confirmed that they support the children in meeting their emotional, psychological, social, and physical requirements in all respects.

One participant expressed:

"I explicitly inform all the children that I am available to assist them at all times, and encourage them to approach me for any task or assignment. I think it brings to a positive emotional state in the individuals". (Respondent-121: Caregiver (female/rural))

On the other hand, some participant ($f=70$ out of 260, 27%) said that a reasonable number of the caregivers do not perform their job at the desired level and most of the time engage themselves in unnecessary and useless activities during their working hours.

Financial Constraints

The majority of caregivers ($f=210$ out of 260, 81%) expressed that in spite of the availability of sufficient resources and facilities by the government, they have to face a lot of problems in performing their duties. These problems are multi-dimensional and belong to the school environment, parents' and community attitudes towards the education of the children, and financial issues. They stated that due to a shortage of teachers in public schools, trained ECCE caregivers are unable to continue providing their services to ECCE classes. The government pays Rs. 8000/ month to a caregiver yet practically, the responsibilities of a caregiver are almost identical to those of an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teacher.

One of the caregiver stated as under:

"Due to financial constraints, it is very difficult for us to continue serving as caregiver. I am serving in a school with less than one hundred students. With this smaller number of students, the school receives very little amount of NSB from the government. It is quite challenging for the school to manage the fundamental resources and my salary as a caregiver." (Respondent-13: Caregiver (female/rural))

Addressing the Problems while Performing Duties

It was found that caregiver have to face various problems while performing their duties in the ECCE schools. These problems are related to financial, managerial, and communication between the caregiver and the teachers, between parents and the teachers, and between school and the community as well.

The caregivers were asked to inform about the ways and means as to how they deal with any kind of problems they face during performing their job. The majority of caregivers ($f=219$ out of 260, 84%) stated that they use different channels and forums to deal with the problems they face. For example, if a problem is related to the classroom setting, they try to resolve it by discussing it with ECCE teachers, and if it is concerned with the managerial or disciplinary domain, they share it with head teacher of the school. There might be some problems that are related to the parents and other community members; they solve them in consultation with the school head also. However, there are some problems that are not in the access of the ECCE teacher or the head teacher of the school, they remain undressed. For example, sometimes in some schools, there is a shortage of funds, which results in the inability of school administration to timely pay the caregiver salary, or in some cases, the net amount of funds received in the school is so small that the school is unable to afford the honorarium of the caregiver after paying its regular utility bills, e.g. electricity bills, stationary bills, and minor maintenance.

For instance, one caregiver participant provided an example by stating,

"It is difficult for me to handle 100 pupils in the classroom. So I manage it with the help of the ECCE teacher". (Respondent-106, Caregiver (female/urban)

However, a considerable number of the caregivers ($f=30$ out of 260, 12%) proclaimed that they are able enough to deal with any kind of problems they come across during the teaching learning and assessment practices.

On the other hand, a small number of the respondents ($f=11$ out of 260, 4%) responded in a pessimist way, saying that these problems have been in the system, for a long time, they are still here and will remain for a longer period of time, and they have no way to solve or address these problems.

"Some educated parents have a strong dislike towards attending school because of the attitude of ECCE teachers in public schools. Traditionally, the teacher's attitude is really strict. The teacher consistently punishes students for failing to do his assignment. It is very difficult to solve the organizational problems occurring in the school education system for decades. Education is not on priority list of the government; the public school teacher is not willing to teach wholeheartedly, and the community has nothing to do with the education of the children...so, no change is expected in the phenomenon and consequently no solution to the problems". (Respondent-96, Caregivers (female/rural)

Results

The majority of caregivers ($f=170$ out of 260, 65%) said that the training they received was useful for carrying out the ECCE program successfully. Talking about the basic needs, the majority of caregivers ($f=190$ out of 260, 73%) confirmed that they support the children in meeting their emotional, psychological, social, and physical needs in all respects. The majority of caregivers ($f=210$ out of 260, 81%) expressed that in spite of the availability of sufficient resources and facilities by the government of Punjab, they have to face a lot of problems in performing their duties as well as financial constraints. These problems are multi-dimensional and belong to the school environment, parents' and community attitudes towards the education of the children, and financial issues. Most of the caregivers ($f=219$ out of 260, 84%) reported that they use different channels and forums to deal with the problems they face. For example, if a problem is related to the classroom setting, they try to resolve it by discussing it with ECCE teachers, and if it is concerned with the managerial or disciplinary domain, they share it with head teachers of the school.

Discussion

In order to fulfill SDG objective 4.2, which calls for providing at least a year of high-quality care and education, Pakistan must greatly enhance its Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) system. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Pakistan has been a topic of national policy since the 1970s, when katchi classes were

introduced into public schools (Tahira et al., 2021). Mainstreaming ECCE in the formal education system was the goal of the National Education Policies published in 1992 and 1998 (Bibi et al., 2022). The National Education Policy, 2009 focused on theme like age group for ECCE, the interactive environment, and the child's overall development (Swati et al., 2023). Government of the Punjab introduced the Education reforms namely Punjab School Education Sector Plan (PSESP) 2013-2017, which concentrated on providing Early Childhood Care and Education to children relying on available facilities and resources (Shabnam et al., 2023). This component is the SDG-4.2 which mandates that an ECCE program be put into place for two years. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the ECCE curriculum is flexible and may easily be expanded to include a pre-primary grade for children.

Conclusion

Early childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is known to have a significant impact on a child's social, emotional, physical and linguistic development. As a result, ECCE caregivers may focus especially on comprehending a child's requirements throughout this critical period of development. The federal and provincial governments are working to provide early childhood care and education (ECCE) to the children in their various regions because of the significance of this program. It is concluded that the ECCE program's goals are being met; yet, their perspectives about the program's scope were found to differ. The Caregivers supported that the facilities like trainings and learning material (ECCE kit) supplied by QAED and budgetary resources are insufficient. They also noted that the resources supplied were insufficient to carry out the ECCE program successfully. To make sure that Pakistan's transformation of the ECCE does not overlook anything, however, it will require clear and persistent work. These will act as role models for the other schools. In order to further enhance the advantages, the education sector will need to leverage the power of pedagogy and technology. That will put Pakistani education on a path toward progress.

Recommendations

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs are essential to the development and growth of young children. On the basis of the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

The caregivers put forward the following suggestions for the improvement of the ECCE programme.

- There is an urgent need for continuous physical training for ECCE caregivers.
- The government should ensure to provide other relevant resources (like the provision of ECCE kits) to facilitate the ECCE personnel in the schools.
- The provision of sufficient funds to fulfil the basic requirements of the ECCE classroom setting so that the objectives of the program can be materialized.

- Initiating a program is a simple task, but, maintaining its up-to-date status might prove challenging.
- Parent-teacher relations need to be strengthened by keeping lines of communication open and providing chances for their participation.
- Special funds may be allocated for the honorarium of ECCE caregivers and other compulsory requirements. The caregivers must be provided professional training at regular intervals to enhance their professional capacity.

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