

Early Childhood Education

Rethink and Reform

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About the Author



Nasira Habib specializes in basic education that is integrative, holistic, relevant and gender just. She is the author of an indigenous model of early childhood care and development in Pakistan. She has also developed textbooks and teachers' guides for non-formal education. Her work on community development through women's education has earned her international acclaim. She has presented a new fast-track method of teaching literacy. Her work on early childhood, non-formal and women's education has been translated into Sindhi.

Her particular focus is to include gender, ecological and cultural perspectives on education at all levels.

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Abstract

Pakistan finally recognised the need for a separate curriculum for early childhood education in the shape of a national curriculum presented in 2002 which was replaced, after five years, by another curriculum in 2007. Though a step in the right direction, the issue still needs a constructive dialogue and debate to make the curriculum a true representative of our sociocultural and economic realities and is responsive to children's developmental and educational needs. The proposed paper discusses the gaps and lacunae in the current curriculum document, shares an indigenous model of early childhood education and development and presents recommendations for curricular reforms.

Introduction

Pakistan's commitment to early childhood education is relatively recent. It started with the international initiative on Education for All (EFA)ⁱ. The first international commitment was made in 1990 in the World Education Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand which was reaffirmed a decade later in Dakar, Senegal in the shape of a Framework for Action. Though not a home-grown idea, it carries great significance. Recognition of the need to make educational interventions for the holistic development of young children at the state level has the tremendous potential to make a positive contribution in the lives of children, especially the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable.

The first goal of Education for All was to “expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children.” In response to the international commitment Pakistan made to this goal, the first ever curriculum on early childhood education was launched in 2002 which was replaced by another one in 2007. Later, in 2008, when education became a provincial subject as a result of devolution, the 2007 curriculum was adopted by the provinces.ⁱⁱ

As the EFA goal could not be achieved within the timeframe agreed by the states, a new deadline was fixed for Social Development Goals. The fourth SDG reasserts the need for early childhood education and development in the following words in 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”.

Pakistan lags far behind the target despite inclusion of those children in the enrolment list who are in the age bracket of early childhood education and who go to public sector schools in *katchi class*. These *katchi* classes do not follow the National Curriculum on Early Childhood “and over the year (the children spend in the school) they learn simple alphabets and numbers only.”ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, Pakistan Education for All Review Report 2015 affirms that “Pre-Primary/Katchi class neither has

a separate classroom nor a specific trained and qualified teacher. The children are usually those who accompany their older siblings to school and simply “sit around” in school premises.”^{iv} The Report itself categorises this type of early childhood education as “poor quality.”^v The National Curriculum is implemented only in selected schools, mostly supported by donors.^{vi}

In order to understand the slow acceptance and implementation of the National Curriculum, we need to have a fresh look at its philosophy and contents. The fact that it was approved and launched a decade ago means that a critical review is necessary.

Methodology

The methodology of the paper is based on the following activities:

- Review of the National curriculum on early childhood education 2007
- Review of the secondary materials including caregivers’ guides
- Field visits of ECCD and ECE centres
- Insights gained from the process of developing thematic plans for a year for Plan International
- Insights gained from early childhood education in Khoj School for Community Education in the village Thathi Bhanguaan since 2011

The National Curriculum on Early Childhood Education 2007

The ECE curriculum is meant to be a reference for all stakeholders, especially teachers.^{vii} It is based on High Scope, an early childhood education approach that was developed in Michigan in 1970. The High Scope approach draws inspiration largely from Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development and the findings of brain research.

The central belief of the High Scope approach is that children construct their own learning by doing and being involved in working with materials, people and

objects. Children are required to be in a material-rich environment. The teacher is supposed to play the key role through child-relevant routine planning based on the curriculum, deciding what is best for the children she works with. Her role demands a good grasp of the curriculum guidelines and the underlying philosophy.

The curriculum aims at holistic development of children through five areas of learning, i.e. physical development, social and moral development, emotional development, language development and cognitive development. The process of learning is based on the four distinct stages of intellectual development as expounded by Piaget. Those developmental stages are: sensory motor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational in a sequential order without any overlap.

Taking its cue from the High Scope approach, the curriculum requires learning corners in the classroom, e.g. language corner, library corner, art corner, math corner, science corner, home corner. This design calls for rooms of considerable size to accommodate the shelves, books, toys and other materials and to offer space to children to play or work in the corners.

Every day is organized around a daily routine consisting of a set sequence with a time breakdown of activities. They are required to spend a stipulated amount of time on:

- *Dua/national anthem*
- *Greeting circle*
- *Group work time*
- *Outside time*
- *Snack time*
- *Plan/work/review/clean-up time*
- *Story and rhyme time*

Though the Preface of the curriculum asserts, “great care has been taken to ensure that the active learning model in this curriculum is culturally relevant, and is firmly grounded in the Pakistani context and the needs of our society,”^{viii} the contents of the curriculum do not establish it. The list of references at the end of the document does not refer to any work done on the subject in Pakistan – with the exception of one.

Piaget’s theory of developmental stages, which serves as the main inspiration for High Scope, has come under heavy criticism by researchers in the Western world itself. They not only critique the theory but question his research method itself. The small research sample consisted of his three children and the children of well-educated professionals of high socioeconomic status^{ix} from Geneva.

If the researchers in the West consider his findings unrepresentative, how can they provide guidelines for the development of the majority of our children who have very different sociocultural, economic and political backgrounds, thinking patterns and worldviews?

My experience of working with disadvantaged children shows that the reality of our children is very different from what is reflected in Piaget’s developmental stages as detailed in the curriculum document. It says, “if infants cannot see or touch an object, they stop trying to find it”^x which is a total negation of the attempts a child makes, right from the first year, for instance, to learn a language without seeing or touching anything.

Children have a serious element of abstraction in their thinking when they have learnt concepts like good, bad, right, wrong, one, two, three and they start raising highly complex philosophical questions, for example, about God, which pose a mind-boggling challenge for the adults. A number of researchers, the list, in fact, is too long, support my observations and assertions that Piaget underestimates the abilities of children.^{xi}

There are other questions as well staring us in the face. Who are the caregivers in the majority of the ECE centres? Are our ECE teachers competent and qualified

enough to pick up the scanty treatment of the philosophy and principles behind the curriculum, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, developmental stages and research on brain development? How many teachers / caregivers have access to this document and how many of them are able to comprehend the concepts – whether in English or in Urdu? How many of our teachers are comfortable with the concept of learning corners and organizing and managing them? How many of them actually understand the threatening words of plan-work-review?

The curriculum has expectations from the children which are self-contradictory in nature. A four or five year-old child is expected to begin to develop the attitude, knowledge and skills for something as basic as

- *To differentiate between some and all and that some is less than all*
- *Understand one to one correspondence*
- *Count correctly from 1-9*

While in reality, it is difficult to find four or five year old children who can't differentiate between some and all or who are unable to count from 1-9. The ground reality informs us that children in this age bracket, especially from disadvantaged families, can deal with tens and even hundreds. It is a routine matter for them to go to a *mohalla* shop to buy kitchen supplies like sugar, milk, tea, spices, pulses, vegetables, soft drinks, etc. As items in daily use are quite expensive, they have to learn basic arithmetic operations to make necessary calculations at the shops which they quickly master at a very early age. Not only that, rural children are also experts in bartering goods. They take a certain amount of wheat, for instance, to the village shop, get it weighed, calculate the price, buy the desired item and get the balance, if any.

But then the curriculum takes a sudden leap and the same children are expected to begin to develop the attitude, knowledge and skills for concepts as complex as the following:

- *Understand the need of clean air*

- *Understand the uses of water and the need to conserve*
- *Awareness of noise pollution*
- *Alternate use of materials*
- *Alternatives to practices that are harmful for the environment*
- *Implement the careful use of resources*
- *Identify healthy and unhealthy food*
- *Share ideas for creating various objects from waste material*
- *Use various art techniques such as drawing, coloring, collage or printing to create their own craft work.*
- *Talk about the process of constructing their craft project, giving reasons for their choice of materials*
- *Make personal choices from the available materials for creating their own collage*

These above expected learning outcomes (ELOs) defeat the Piagetian theoretical assertion that children in the 2-7 year age bracket “still learn from concrete material, while adults can learn in an abstract way. The preoperational child is also unaware of another person’s perspective.”^{xii}

There are other inconsistencies as well in the curriculum document. There is a mention of six learning areas but on pages 6 and 7, there is a list of the following five learning areas:

Physical development, social and moral development, emotional development, language development and cognitive development.

Later, on pages 12-13, the key learning areas are listed as below:

- *Personal and social development*
- *Basic mathematical concepts*
- *The world around us*
- *Health, hygiene and safety*
- *Creative arts*

The curriculum demands a materials-intensive learning environment. There is a list of suggested materials which also includes musical instruments, aprons, typewriters, computer keyboards, measuring spoons, placemats etc. which many children don't have the opportunity to even see, especially in rural Pakistan. Promoting such a capital-intensive methodology with serious questions about its relevance to ground realities, may well turn out to be unsustainable with the result of never achieving the target of providing care and education to all young children.

The primary schools in Pakistan which conduct pre-primary classes as well give children an experience of school life that is based on regimentation, awe of the teacher and the rote learning system that is fatal to creativity. The lower levels of educational attainment among teachers raise serious capacity issues to effectively deal with even the syllabus they are supposed to cover. On the other hand, ECE/ECCD demands an alternative culture of love, affection and care.

Conclusion

Neither did the need for early childhood education emerge locally nor has the curriculum originated in the realities of our children. The theoretical framework, the spaces and the materials required, the absence of caregivers, the capacity issues of the teachers in public and private sector schools has created an unwieldy situation. The 2007 Curriculum has failed to replace the *katchi* primer, whose rote memorization takes creativity, imagination and logical thinking away from the children. They are still cramming *Alif Anaar* and *Bay Bakri*.

In order to chalk out a curriculum which has a sociocultural and economic relevance it is absolutely imperative to learn from the life around us. There are experiments scattered at various locations in the country which offer us findings and learning of vital importance. A considerable amount of work has been done over the last ten years by Plan International and their partners, UNICEF, Directorate of Staff Development, Rupani Foundation and Khoj – Society for

People's Education, to name a few. Their experiences and learning can go a long way in arriving at a curriculum that is responsive to local conditions and cultures.

Having common standards at the national and provincial levels, there should be open space for development of not only one model but many indigenous models of early childhood care, education and development – as the diversity of our local cultures demands. There is already one indigenous model in place that focuses on the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the children from the rural, semi-urban and the disadvantaged households. Giving an educational angle, it includes indigenous games, role plays, stories and plays. Just to take the example of indigenous games, caregivers were found not only already familiar with the games but had also played them in their childhood. They found playing these games with children very interesting. As they understood them very well, it was not difficult for them to make linkages with the teaching and learning objectives and outcomes. Likewise, children were playing some of the indigenous games before coming to school. Playing those games at school was a continuation of a local cultural activity and they are not made to feel shy or experience shame at their own culture. *Barhatay hu'ai Qadam*^{xiii} presents this model in the form of thematic weekly plans for the curriculum cycle of one year. Learning from the subsequent experience, the publication has been revised thoroughly.

Girl children do not have equal opportunities and experience all forms of discrimination and oppression. The World Economic Forum recognized this and placed Pakistan as the second worst country on gender equality in its Global Gender Gap index released in November 2017. The gravity of the situation demands that it must be a prerequisite for all educational endeavours to include strategies which ensure a firm belief among children in gender equality and gender justice. The 2007 curriculum pays no attention to this aspect of children's character formation.

Given the newness of the approach and methodology, it is absolutely necessary to run ECE in the format of participatory action research. As the teachers and caregivers are the primary contact with the children, parents and the communities, they should be included as equal partners in the research. The process and findings of such research could equip the teachers with a number of tools and competencies. It would also help them understand the issues around ECE in the local context, the thinking patterns of the communities and learning styles of the children, to explore culture-specific themes, activities and games, to identify the culturally relevant learning materials, and to work on developing them. They can also learn how young children learn a language and what their developmental stages are in the Pakistani context. In addition, parents and other family caregivers must be given a substantial representation in the action research as they have the greatest stakes. They can be the main drivers to ensure a culture of love and affection at the ECE centres. The findings of such research would, in the long run, become curriculum guidelines that are home-grown and not alien and threatening to the teachers.

Most of the teaching/learning materials developed and used are expensive, elitist in nature and alien to the daily experience of the majority of the children in this country. Age-appropriate, socioeconomically and culturally relevant ECE materials are almost non-existent. In order to advance the agenda of early childhood education and development, it is imperative to invest in the development of low-cost and relevant ECE learning/teaching materials. It is essential to find and create age-appropriate stories and poems that correspond to the selected themes. The identification of appropriate local games which could result in effective learning is another need of vital importance. The development of relevant learning activities for cognitive, moral, social, physical and language development cannot be overemphasised.

The curriculum on early childhood care, development and education should not be limited to 4-5 years (which itself is confusing, as it is not clear whether it starts

from Year Four to the beginning of Year Five or includes years Four and Five both). As a matter of policy, the age bracket of Zero to Six should be recognised as the period of early childhood interventions.

The prerequisite of result-based effective work on the ground is intensive training of caregivers followed by regular trouble-shooting sessions. Successful implementation requires attitudinal changes in the implementers including coordinating and monitoring staff.

The work cannot be left to caregivers only who have very limited capacities and capabilities. They need constant handholding in making daily plans that would draw on a well-structured assessment and evaluation system that is not threatening but supportive in nature for the caregivers and the teachers.

It is imperative for the trainers and assessors to be fully immersed in the philosophy of early childhood care, education and development and to clearly appreciate the need to create an alternative culture of care and compassion. Otherwise ECE *outside* children's homes in a school environment can be counterproductive.

ECE is followed by primary education in the country. At present, there is no smooth transition from one level to the other – either in approach, method or content. This can retard the development of children. It is an urgent requirement to address these policy issues and work towards viable alternative models of primary education which are supportive of ECE and help children in self-exploration and self-actualization.

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