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Challenges in Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) in public sector schools of South Punjab: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Despite ECCE serving as a main support for children's development, its application in public schools in South Punjab did not work very well due to various issues. The study conducted qualitative research into the delivery barriers of ECCE programs through the feedback of 14 educators and administrators from six districts. Findings revealed three critical issues: (1) Long delays in how policies were carried out, (2) A lack of trained teachers in early childhood education, and (3) Difficulties for parents to be involved because of their low economic status. The research suggested that to overcome these problems, integrated approaches, for example, community-based information campaigns and teacher training at the local level, should be applied. Nonetheless, the fact that the data was applied only to a selected region, and had a small size suggested the need to conduct studies in other underserved parts of the country. The study ended by recommending several policies that could improve both how accessible and high-quality ECCE was in South Punjab. Open-ended qualitative Google surveys collected responses from 14 respondents, public sector teachers and Assistant Education Officers (AEOs) who were working for ECCE in South Punjab. The findings indicated that a lack of proper policy implementation, resource scarcity, and poor teacher training were the major challenges for them. Supporting early learning required community as well as school-based action, yet poor parental involvement with socioeconomic gaps made educational outcomes difficult to achieve. The study further outlined the effective strategies that would assist in responding to such diversified development needs of younger learners, and it called for a focused intervention. The collaboration of governmental agencies, schools, and families was underlined as one strategy to enhance ECCE practices. As systematic gaps were revealed by this study, a contribution was made to the continuous debate on how early childhood education could be improved in disadvantaged regions.

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Keywords: early childhood education, public sector schools, policy impact, parental involvement, developmental needs, South Punjab

Introduction

Social scientists have long been interested in the growing gap between the wealthy and everyone else, as well as the problems of stratification and social mobility that this creates. Inter-generational income elasticities are stronger and inter-generational income mobility is less under economically unequal distributions (Björklund & Jäntti, [2009](#)). Transferring one's social or professional standing from one generation to the next is another area that sociologist's study in depth. For example, according to Blau and Duncan's ([1967](#)) classic status attainment model, education is seen as a vehicle for social mobility and a way for social reproduction, and it plays a significant role in both the achievement of social status and inter-generational social mobility in contemporary society. While education may be a ladder to economic mobility for children from low-income homes, the amount and quality of such education depends on the family's socio-economic situation. Consequently, the significance of parents and family in a child's development is substantial (Ishida et al., [1995](#)).

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) stands as an essential base for continuous learning processes that develop from early stages into later life. Research from ECCE programs leads children to establish better primary school readiness through improved literacy and mathematics skills that bring better educational achievements across their entire lifetime. The Bunyad program of PHCIP builds on 3,400 ECCE facilities that span 11 districts throughout Pakistan as part of its district-wide facility upgrade initiative. School readiness improves when Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs function effectively, and this, in turn, enhances literacy and mathematics performance, leading to substantial educational achievements. However, despite this acknowledged importance and ongoing reforms, ECCE in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab province, faces persistent and multifaceted challenges. ECCE faces numerous obstacles in Pakistan because of insufficient funding and too few qualified educators, in addition to bureaucratic constraints that limit children's entry to quality learning environments (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, [2024](#)).

Studies on social mobility try to pin down the processes and mechanisms by which inter-generational socioeconomic position is

transmitted. Researchers in this area have recently shifted their focus from the classic O-E-D triangle to a life-course view, which considers the cumulative advantages and disadvantages of birth (DiPrete & Eirich, [2006](#)). Academic success and formal schooling are both products of social stratification, although studies on both subjects often disproportionately emphasize the function of formal schooling. During the early years of a child's life, while their cognitive and non-cognitive skills are still developing, families lay the groundwork for human capital investment. Early childhood development has been an increasingly popular topic in social science studies, with strong support from neuroscience and brain science studies (McEwen & McEwen, [2017](#)). During the first few years of life, when synaptic connections are formed at a high pace, the human brain is most malleable, and undergoes rapid growth (Nelson, [2000](#)). Academic performance and accomplishments are influenced by a variety of factors, including genetics, early life experiences, and the quality of one's family and the environment in which they were raised (Gertler et al., [2014](#); Kulic et al., [2019](#)). According to James Heckman, a Nobel laureate in economics, one of the main reasons for social mobility to remain stagnant is the inability of families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to nurture their children (Heckman et al., [2006](#)).

Human capital accumulation theory states that families should start investing in their kids at a young age. During a child's prenatal and early life phases, investments in human capital pay off the most in terms of future growth, according to Heckman et al. ([2006](#)). An investment in preschool programs may provide a return of 7–10% each year, which is higher than the average return on U.S. equities. This figure does not account for intangible advantages; it only includes the monetary value of the health, nutrition, cognitive, and social-emotional development that children aged 0-3 years get from the programs. Governments must prioritize the poor, work to reduce social inequities and encourage social mobility if they are to maintain values of justice and fairness. When disadvantaged youngsters wait until they are adults, and face challenges in school and employment, before receiving social welfare services, the system is inefficient. To ensure that every kid has equal chances and a good start in life, policy interventions should instead be implemented at the early stages of development.

The educational levels and human development measures in South Punjab significantly trail behind those found in other parts of Punjab

province. Children who do not attend good preschool programs in this region start their school careers behind due to this disadvantage. The insufficient number of qualified ECCE teachers and insufficient quality of school buildings create hurdles to educational advancement. Rural regions experience high student dropout rates as well as insufficient educational resources and limited economic opportunities which keep girls and children from completing their studies. Weak socioeconomic families default to immediate financial requirements rather than making longer-term educational investments, and hence, their children cannot break free from their current economic situation (Leisman et al., [2015](#)).

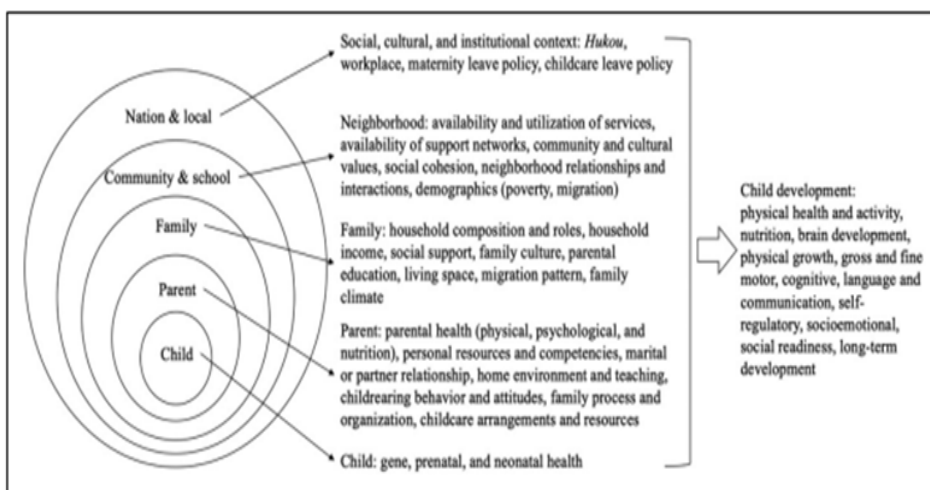
The educational difficulties between South Punjab and social mobility form a direct connection. When early education lacks adequate strength, children from poverty-stricken homes struggle against fellow students who come from wealthier families. When good ECCE programs are not available, children start school underprepared which results in academic difficulties that lead to increased school dropouts. Employment opportunities become less accessible to these individuals because they lack essential skills so they remain stuck in generational poverty (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, [2024](#)).

South Punjab requires immediate policy measures which must focus on developing early childhood education systems. The gap between wealthy and impoverished children can be diminished through additional early education funding combined with trained educator recruitment and availability of improved education materials. The adoption of an inclusive policy that guarantees proper ECCE access will support continuous social and economic development by delivering equal success opportunities for South Punjab's children like their counterparts in advanced regions.

South Punjab has more disadvantages in the area of early childhood education than other parts of Pakistan. Since 32% of public schools provide ECCE to students (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, [2024](#)), children in rural areas usually don't have a strong base in reading or numbers when starting primary school. As a result of this gap, many people remain stuck in poverty for several generations, as Heckman et al. ([2006](#)) shows that early support helps more than fixing the problem in adulthood. Even the Pakistan Early Childhood Education Curriculum is not being successfully put into practice in South Punjab, mainly due to issues with bureaucracy and resources (Ansari et al., [2024](#)). The report looks at how shortcomings in the system

and challenges from culture and finance both reduce the standard of ECCE. This research looks at the views of teachers and school officials to find answers that can help South Punjab specifically. The research questions focus on gaps in policy implementation, how the role of supporting communities matters, what stops families from engaging, and approaches to fair delivery of ECCE.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Note. Source: (Wu et al., [2024](#))

There are many different levels and dimensions of elements that influence a child's development, as shown in the framework. Therefore, studies pertaining to child development need to be carried out at the micro, meso, and macro levels, which together constitute an ecological system for child development (Bronfenbrenner, [1974](#), [1977](#)).

Research Objectives

- To analyze the impact of national and local policies on early childhood education in South Punjab.
- To evaluate the role of community and school support in early childhood education in South Punjab.
- To examine the influence of family dynamics on children's development and education in South Punjab.

- To identify strategies for addressing diverse developmental needs in early learners.

Research Questions

- What is the impact of national and local policies on early childhood education in South Punjab?
- How do community and school support systems influence early childhood education in South Punjab?
- In what ways do family dynamics affect children's development and education?
- What strategies can effectively address the diverse developmental needs of early learners in South Punjab?

Literature Review

Before a child ever sets foot in a classroom, their brain is actively growing and developing. Cognitive and socio-emotional abilities are most heavily invested in the first three years of a child's life (Gertler et al., [2014](#)). The brain experiences increased neurogenesis during the first three years of life, according to studies in the biological sciences and the neurosciences. Between fifty-five and seventy-five percent of a baby's caloric expenditure goes towards fueling brain growth. The brain's ability to form new connections between neurons is at its peak at this time, increasing by more than a million connections each second. Infants reach a cognitive peak at the age of three with fully developed visual acuity, auditory capacities, receptive language, and expressive skills (Leisman et al., [2015](#)). The development of a child's cognitive and social-emotional capacities peaks around the age of three, when brain cell activity is almost double that of adults (Gertler et al., [2014](#)). In later life, these early skills and talents determine academic and financial performance, which reinforce and interact with one another (Bowles et al., [2001](#); DiPrete & Jennings, [2012](#)).

A child's future development is significantly impacted by inadequate care throughout their early years. In the 1960s, a notable instance came out of Romanian orphanages, and the government there passed "Decree 770" to ban abortions and promote births by outlawing contraception. Many babies became orphans because their poor families couldn't afford to care for all the new babies who were born. At the time, Romania's communist

government built hundreds of orphanages across the country to take in these kids. Brain scans taken later on these kids showed that they were much slower to develop and learn than their typically developing peers who had parental care. However, their chances of leading a typical life as adults were better if they were adopted quickly (Gertler et al., [2014](#)).

Long-term Effects on Early Childhood Development: The Marshmallow Test

The groundbreaking research by Mischel and Ebbesen ([1970](#)), often referred to as the Marshmallow Test in psychology, investigated the effects of early childhood development on adult development. In this study, 32 kindergarteners, ranging from 3 years and 6 months to 5 years and 8 months, were observed to demonstrate early self-control or delayed gratification. Children were given the option of getting a modest reward (like a marshmallow) right away or waiting for a while to get a bigger one (like two marshmallows). Delaying gratification was associated with improved social skills, decreased risk of substance misuse and obesity in adulthood, greater scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and higher levels of patience and self-control in children (Schlam et al., [2013](#)).

There are few social science studies as well-known as The Marshmallow Test. On the other hand, the study's under-representation of under-represented groups in the sample has drawn significant criticism in recent years. The majority of the participants were middle- and upper-class, therefore some researchers argue that delayed gratification may not affect kids from lower-income households who had it worse growing up. The capacity to put off receiving immediate satisfaction may develop in youngsters as a result of their environment (Watts et al., [2018](#)). Several variables, including socioeconomic status, cognitive development, and family history, may influence children's behavior as they mature. After taking these into account, the effect of delayed gratification is less pronounced than it first seemed. For example, 1990s longitudinal research with 1,000 4-year-olds discovered that the Marshmallow Test might predict their performance in adolescence, although the association was half as strong as first thought.

Early Childhood Intervention Research and Causal Evidence

Economists study children's early experiences to determine what factors have the most impact on their future socioeconomic status. Heckman et al.

(2006) and Heckman et al. (2013) did the most comprehensive research on early childhood education interventions for low-income households. For children from low-income households, the Perry Preschool Project (PPPP) was an early childhood initiative that aimed to improve their academic performance. According to research conducted by Heckman et al. (2013), children who had access to high-quality early childhood education were less likely to get pregnant at a young age, were less likely to commit crimes, were more likely to graduate from high school, had better job prospects, and had higher incomes and rates of home and car ownership. In terms of societal benefits, Heckman et al. (2006) found that investing in early education returned an average of 7% to 10% each year. Therefore, the government should guarantee children's early development via social welfare programs, taking into account the cost-benefit analysis from a public policy perspective.

The significance of prenatal and infant care (0-3 years) in human capital investment and skill formation has been further supported by these randomized experimental (intervention) programs and their follow-up studies. This establishes a causal link between the development of early childhood capabilities and socioeconomic achievement in adulthood. This kind of study has given many nations the scientific groundwork they needed to expand their poverty reduction efforts to include child development initiatives. The Head Start program in the US and the Sure Start program in the UK are two examples of the many initiatives that have been established to improve early childhood education, family assistance, and newborn and child care (Glass, 1999; Vinovskis, 2005).

Longitudinal Survey of Early Childhood Development

Researchers in the fields of social science and education have been steadily increasing their use of population-based random sampling and longitudinal surveys on preschoolers since the start of the new millennium, drawing on previous studies' findings. For the sake of both academic study and policy-making, these investigations have produced extensive and useful data. For example, the National Educational Panel Study in Germany and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey in the US have both produced useful information for studying the connections between home, school, and community, as well as between personal variables and a child's growth, early education, and academic success.

Research using these representative longitudinal surveys of the general public has shown that across nations, health inequalities as well as differences in cognitive and non-cognitive development between children of various socioeconomic origins manifest themselves at a very early age. These differences arise from the interplay between genes and upbringing, and they are modifiable by changes in parental conduct. In addition, there are substantial gaps in the fundamental preparation of children for various socioeconomic situations before they reach the formal education system, and these differences have a substantial impact on their academic success in school. This is true across nations. For that reason, bridging the gaps in preschool education is critical (Kulic et al., [2019](#)). The gaps that appear throughout preschool also tend to stay. Consequences and benefits keep piling up, making it harder for people to move up the socioeconomic ladder (Attanasio et al., [2022](#)).

These initiatives are innovative because they follow the same strategies that have been used in the West since the 1960s to help disadvantaged children. They focus on investing in human capital and child development as part of their national efforts to reduce rural poverty. This makes the results very useful for future policies. More broadly, these methods highlight the importance of early childhood education and parental involvement in preschool years.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in South Asia: Challenges and Progress

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) draws more awareness in South Asia since large proportions of the population suffer from socioeconomic imbalances that impede access to decent early education. Recognizing their value in breaking poverty cycles and enhancing long term learning results, nations such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have put considerable effort into expanding ECCE initiatives. South Asia still has organizational difficulties including insufficient government spending, bad infrastructure, and disparities in rural and urban access, notwithstanding these endeavors. Often valuing immediate financial survival over instruction for little ones, many poor families in the area do not realize the need of early education (Kulic et al., [2019](#)).

The quality of ECCE in South Asia is determined by three elements: In urban Punjab, policy coherence, well-prepared teachers, and community

support helped the Bunyad program build 3,440 ECCE centers. In rural South Punjab, though, it failed because staff lacked preparation and often turned up late without notice. Likewise, India's Anganwadi shows that community-based ECCE can function in places with low resources, provided it is adequately funded by the government (Gertler et al., [2014](#)). Traditional norms in South Punjab also make early childhood education more complicated. According to a 2023 survey in Bahawalpur, more than half (62%) of parents give more importance to Quranic education compared to formal pre-schooling, which they think is not applicable to farming (Participant 12). This is similar to what is found in Bangladesh, where the education of a mother influences whether her child takes part in ECCE (Kulic et al., [2019](#)).

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Pakistan: Regional Disparities and Policy Gaps

Recent years have brought considerable growth to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Pakistan but significant differences exist between urban and rural regions. The ECCE integration efforts of Punjab government continue but the provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face challenges when implementing policy-related initiatives. South Punjab stands as one of the least developed areas in Pakistan since quality ECCE opportunities remain restricted across its territory. This region faces two significant obstacles against early education progress because most public schools do not have assigned ECCE classrooms while there is a lack of qualified educators. The lack of awareness about ECCE importance from parents leads to reduced attendance in early education programs (Gertler et al., [2014](#)).

The problems become more severe because of the lack of nationwide standardized curriculum for ECCE programs. The early education system at private institutions in urban areas functions with organized teaching methods while the public education system in rural areas does not have appropriate education materials in the classrooms. The National Education Policy, together with the Pakistan Early Childhood Education Curriculum launched by the government aims to build ECCE standards but implementation faces delays because of financial shortages along with inefficient administration practices. The implementation of region-specific measures should focus on rural ECCE program support and community education through local outreach and qualified teachers. Children residing

in marginalized areas of South Punjab will remain restricted from early educational opportunities and eventual academic and professional success due to a lack of targeted intervention.

Methodology

Finding out how schools are doing with ECE policies is the primary goal of this research. This research aims to understand the needs of the industry in partnership with educational establishments. The researcher may learn more about the phenomena in general and its specifics by conducting in-depth analyses of emotions, attitudes, behaviours, ideas, and perceptions (Sharma, [2017](#)). Purposive sampling was used to choose the data.

This study used purposive sampling to pick 14 individuals (8 teachers and 6 AEOs) from the districts of Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan, Lodhran, and others in South Punjab. Those interviewed included AEOs for understanding the role at the policy level and teachers for experiences on the ground. Data was collected on Google Surveys, making it possible for people in remote places with little internet to join the research. However, this approach could have left out educators who are not too familiar with technology, leading to a bias in the selection. Looking at the responses, there were a few repeat ideas (teachers being moved) that were reported by nearly two-thirds of those studied, however, the size of the sample prevents us from saying these ideas will apply to broader populations. More research is needed to confirm these results with detailed surveys in all 11 South Punjab districts.

Participants gave their consent for the open-ended qualitative Google surveys to be transcribed and utilized. The researcher mentioned the purpose of the open-ended surveys. One of the most popular techniques for analyzing qualitative data is thematic analysis (Clark et al. [2015](#)). The different nodes and sub-nodes are created by data analysis in the process of theme analysis. These nodes are later combined to create important themes. The study was conducted with meticulous attention to ethical issues. The method and goal of the data collection were explained in the introductory comments to each participant. The participants gave their consent for their responses to be reviewed and interpreted. At no time were they compelled to respond to any specific inquiry. Any inquiry or action that could negatively impact the participants' feelings was avoided.

Table 1
Participants Information

| No. | Gender | Last Qualification | Experience in ECCE | District | Job Title | Organization |
|-----|--------|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-----------|---|
| 1 | Male | MPhil Maths | 7.5 | Mianwali | AEO | School Education Department |
| 2 | Male | M.Sc | 1 year as Master Trainer | Lodhran | AEO | Education Department Punjab |
| 3 | Male | M.Sc Applied Psychology | 2 | Rahim Yar Khan | AEO | Punjab Education Department |
| 4 | Male | M.Ed Science | 9 | Layyah | Teacher | SED Punjab |
| 5 | Female | M.Phil | 9 years | Bahawalpur | Teacher | School Education Department |
| 6 | Male | M.Phil CS | 5 years | Rajanpur | AEO | SED Punjab |
| 7 | Female | M.Phil English Linguistics | 14 years | Bahawalpur | Principal | Rangers Public School and College Bahawalpur |
| 8 | Female | M.Phil Botany | 7 years | Bahawalpur | AEO | School Education Department Punjab |
| 9 | Female | M.Phil Education | 2 years | Rahim Yar Khan | AEO | Government Girls High School Junior Model Khanpur |
| 10 | Male | MScS | 17 years | Bahawalnagar | AEO | District Education Authority, Bahawalnagar |
| 11 | Male | M.Phil CS | 1 year | Rahim Yar Khan | AEO | SED Punjab |
| 12 | Male | M.Phil Math | 6 year | Layyah | Teacher | School Education Department |
| 13 | Male | M.Phil and M.Ed MS | 2 years | Rajanpur | AEO | Education Department |
| 14 | Female | Marketing, MA Urdu, M.Ed | 7 years | Rahim Yar Khan | Teacher | SED Punjab |

Analysis and Discussion

National and Local Context

The quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in public sector schools of South Punjab is heavily influenced by both national policies and the local social and cultural contexts. Interviews with

participants in various districts revealed that these factors significantly affect ECCE programs enrollment, participation, and overall effectiveness. The national policies, for example, the ECCE national policy framework, are set to standardize curriculum, teacher qualifications, and classroom environments that affect the quality of education. This ensures consistency across educational institutions and creates an equal platform for early childhood education. One respondent commented, "ECCE policies guarantee uniform curriculum standards, teacher qualifications, and maximum teacher-child ratios, which all directly impact education quality" (*Participant 2*). Policies that rigorously recruit qualified teachers ensure that ECCE teachers are adequately equipped to support young learners. However, despite these frameworks, implementation and resource allocation gaps are still a concern, especially in rural and remote areas. For example, delayed provision of academic resources, such as ECCE kits, and the transfer of trained teachers without adequate replacements are among the obstacles that prevent the full realization of these policies.

Teacher recruitment policies strongly influence ECCE quality by hiring appropriately qualified teachers who meet specific qualifications suited to the age group's developmental needs. Yet, some stakeholders, through participation, mentioned that in most schools, there is a lack of sufficient training for ECCE teachers, where untrained persons handle the ECCE classes. "There is no ECCE class in my institution." Due to the teacher deficit, only caregivers take care of the class" (*Participant 12*). The deficit affects the quality of teaching and learning. More so when such qualified teachers are transferred or reshuffled to address other staffing deficits. Others pointed out that in order to supplement their role and be able to provide a child-friendly and effective teaching environment, trained ECCE teachers should receive specialized training. One participant remarked, "Trained teachers by ECCE should not be transferred casually; they should be kept for continuity in the ECCE system" (*Participant 13*).

Social context challenges are also presented in the form of expectations from parents and understanding towards ECCE. For the most part, the parents of this region generally expect their children to bring back homework upon return from school. This conflicts with the settings of ECCE as it finds a heightened importance on play-based and activity-oriented learning. This gap often leads to a conversation among the teachers and parents regarding why and how ECCE works, helping parents realize

that there is so much more to be learned in the early years than academics. As one participant puts it, "Parents expect children to bring home books and homework, but ECCE does not follow that tradition. teachers have to work hard to convince them of the importance of non-academic learning." In conclusion, therefore, national policies provide a general framework for implementing ECCE, but local socio-cultural factors substantially influence its effectiveness. For real impact, thus, policy implementation and cultural consideration must be built upon to have early childhood education accessible and cherished in all parts of the regions. Improvement in teacher training and resource provision together with the empowerment of the communities will overturn the challenges faced by ECCE in public sector schools.

Community and School

Availability and use of community services is significant in facilitating public sector school delivery of Early Childhood Care and Education in South Punjab, even though there are also a number of challenges to enabling social cohesion and community support among early learners. In many rural districts, the community services that help support ECCE include local health clinics, parental awareness programs, NGOs' collaboration, and community-driven initiatives. All these are very essential for a friendly learning environment. For instance, a local health clinic offers check-ups and vaccinations that help promote the children's physical health. Workshops run by community-based organizations help parents understand how important early childhood education is and what role they play in building it. As one participant pointed out, "Community service and support are almost 50% through school council members who help organize meetings with people of the area, but the challenge lies in the motivation and follow-through of community members." However, even though these services are available, problems such as resource constraints and the lack of engagement from parents who are busy with work, face financial constraints, or have cultural issues often tend to restrict these programs.

Furthermore, many participants highlighted that the community's role, while supportive morally, often lacks tangible resources. *Participant 4* mentioned, "Mostly, parents don't have much time for their children as education is not their priority. This leads them to focus more on making money to survive rather than putting children to school." Such feeling reflects a general problem of poverty and lack of economic opportunities;

this issue in most cases pushes education to the backside, particularly the early years' of education. Not enough time is available to receive support or get awareness regarding the future benefits of promoting an integrated support system within a community towards ECCE. Cultural and social challenges also pose a challenge in promoting social cohesion and community engagement in ECCE. In most communities, gender, ethnicity, and language diversity are barriers to building strong relationships. Socio-economic status disparity also plays a significant role because most families from low-income backgrounds cannot prioritize education. As one participant noted, "Parents and community members are mostly from labor-class backgrounds. They are mainly busy earning a living and have no resources or time to be able to provide financial support or participate actively in ECCE" (*Participant 7*). These socio-economic factors divide families further, where some value traditional or religious education more than formal ECCE, further dividing the community from participation in ECCE programs.

In conclusion, though community services and support form a vital element in supporting ECCE in South Punjab, challenges posed by economic constraints, cultural diversity, and limited parental engagement hinder the full potential of these services. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to have more awareness regarding the importance of ECCE, and increased trust among members of communities should be cultivated. More inclusive and culturally sensitive initiatives should be developed to bridge the gap between schools and local communities. Providing community services with better quality and accessibility, along with the active involvement of parents, can eventually create a supportive environment for young learners within the region.

Family

Families can play a big role in defeating the challenges ECCE faces within the public schools of South Punjab. The importance of family involvement in schooling for their children has a vast bearing on many processes involved, from helping the child strengthen academic concepts to ensuring regularity in school and good behavior among children. Families that actively engage in their children's education create an environment conducive to better social, emotional, and academic development. Reinforcement of learning at home is one of the main aspects of family involvement. According to one participant, "Family support is essential in

overcoming ECCE challenges because engaged parents reinforce learning at home, boost attendance, and advocate for better resources" (*Participant 9*). This shows that when families are involved, children benefit from both formal learning in school and informal learning at home, which can lead to improved educational outcomes. Moreover, the interest of parents and caregivers towards their children's performance boosts their confidence, self-esteem, and motivation to achieve better. Involvement will enhance academic performance as well as behavioral development in positive ways.

However, there is still room for improvement in other areas of family support. According to many of the participants, awareness and education about early childhood education are imperative, since in most rural regions, parents, due to limited knowledge, often do not perceive the value in long-term effects. One participant said, "Family support helps in surmounting early childhood education challenges since it promotes what is learned in school through what is practiced at home, encourages desirable behavior, and attends to proper attendance" (*Participant 3*). Improvement can be realized through flexible engagement opportunities, holding workshops, and building partnerships that respect the different needs and schedules of families. Targeted awareness campaigns and parenting workshops could help fill these gaps, enabling parents to understand how they can support the learning of their children at home and contribute to their academic and social development.

However, despite all this, the challenge is that not all family involvement would be positive. One of the reoccurring responses was that most families did not have enough time or interest due to economic reasons. Some of the families from lower socio-economic classes do not even take education as important as their survival. "They just leave their children at school" (*Participant 5*). They think the rest is the responsibility of the school. Under such circumstances, families might not fully realize their important role in supporting the education of their children, which might limit them. To redesign family support, a change in the psyche of parents should be ensured, which makes them realize how essential early childhood education is for their child.

Parents

Parental engagement is very essential in resolving issues related to ECCE in the public sector schools of South Punjab. Parents are actively

involved in their children's education and that has a bearing on success, emotional development, and social adjustment. The parents of this region emphasized that their support system strengthens learning at home, encourages school regularity, and thus, determines educational output.

One of the key aspects of parental involvement is the reinforcement of concepts learned outside the classroom. Some participants emphasized the importance of reinforcing what children learn in school; this is an important aspect both for cognitive development and school readiness. As one of the participants stated, "Involvement by parents can make the home a learning-friendly environment and enhance the quality of education" (*Participant 8*). Parents are not only enabling children to grasp academic content but also instilling confidence and motivation to perform better. Holistic support from parents enhances social skills and emotional resilience in children.

Despite the positive impacts of parental involvement, there are challenges. The biggest challenge to engaging parents is that they are unaware of the importance of early childhood education. Many families in South Punjab, especially in rural areas, fail to understand the long-term implications of early education, which is a limiting factor for them. Participants emphasized that awareness needs to be improved. As one respondent indicated, "We can enhance family involvement by organizing focused awareness programs and workshops to sensitize people about the need for early childhood education" (*Participant 5*). Parents should be taught how to establish learning-friendly home environments, learn their responsibilities to support the growth of their children and know the consequences of their participation on both academic and behavioral performance.

Another issue reported by the participants was the financial constraints of many families, which could affect the participation level in the education process. Parents from low-income families might be engaged less in educational activities because of their need to work. One respondent reflected, "Parents sometimes think that school is the only place of education, and do not even consider how important they would be to their child" (*Participant 4*). The position calls for a change in perceptions about parental involvement, making them understand why it is important. One key action in this area has been to introduce policies that encourage or make parents involved in school activities, such as PTMs, a regular affair.

Despite these problems, it can be easily assumed that the participation of parents in ECCE could be significantly improved with more awareness and community-driven support. Such an improvement would help to surmount the present challenges of early childhood education in South Punjab. Schools and the local communities have to collaborate for the creation of supportive environments where such importance is stressed on parental involvement. By upgrading parental involvement via education, policy, and community action, the region can make sure that children get foundational support that ensures success in the future.

Children

One of the major challenges in discussing children's genetic, prenatal, or neonatal health needs in early childhood programs is mainly in areas like Layyah, which is rural. In addition, there are huge shortages for such persons because healthcare services are rarely accessible, and in many cases, these health disorders and genetic illnesses remain undiagnosed at birth. The parents have limited access due to geographical isolation and lack of finances that they require for prenatal care to diagnose the disorder early on. This can lead to developmental delays and health complications that may affect a child's readiness for school and his or her general well-being.

Besides this, many parents of these communities might not be informed about the benefits of prenatal care, appropriate diet during pregnancy, or early detection of genetic disorders. A respondent remarked, "The parents often don't recognize the health issues in their newborns and do not know where to look for help as they are not financially sound" (*Participant 11*). This lack of awareness may further delay the proper medical intervention in the child, which impacts his early developmental periods.

To address these issues, improving linkages between early childhood education programs and healthcare services can be important. Such programs should focus on easier access to prenatal and neonatal care, health education for parents, and early provision of equipment for genetic or health problems. Working with the local health service may ensure children are scanned and treated before entering school, ensuring a healthy beginning in life and subsequent better educational success. In order to support the numerous developmental needs of young children, teaching strategies must be flexible and responsive to the unique cognitive, social, and emotional growth of each child. Differentiated instruction is an important approach

that assists in meeting varied needs of children, especially in terms of cognitive development. Hands-on activities, interactive learning experiences, and play-based approaches are integral steps in creating an environment that develops curiosity and thinking. Simple science experiments, storybooks, and puzzles are some common activities that would be used to engage children at their own pace.

We have developed a multi-stage intervention framework involving concerned stakeholders to fill the ECCE gaps in South Punjab. The framework starts with activities that can be implemented rapidly. One such activity involves sending mobile ECCE units to remote areas—this is modeled on Jamaica's disbursement of community health workers—to immediately provide early learning opportunities to children. In parallel, they will initiate Saraiki radio campaigns for parents to explain how ECCE will benefit their child cognitively and economically, using talking points that respect the local culture and acknowledge literacy barriers.

The research on the problems in Early Childhood Care and Education in the public sector schools of South Punjab reveals multiple interrelated problems, especially regarding family support and access to better health care and early interventions. Family support has been identified as one of the most important determinants of educational outcomes for children. The results of the study among participants indicate that where families are actively involved in the learning process of their children both academically and behaviorally, the children tend to do better in school and exhibit enhanced social and emotional development. The interviews also point out a very important finding: that families that reinforce learning at home and advocate for better resources are important in overcoming educational challenges. However, the answers also highlight the hindrances many families face in fully being involved in the education process—for example, ignorance of the need for early childhood education and the economic limitations to regularly be so involved.

In addition, the paper presented that teaching strategies have to be varied to meet children's different development needs, including cognitive, social, and emotional development. From the results, it is observed that differentiated instruction, play-based learning, and hands-on activities can accommodate the different developmental stages of children. The importance of fostering emotional resilience, positive social behaviors, and cognitive skills through a nurturing learning environment was also

underscored. Such changes in teaching methods are necessary to make an environment where holistic child development can be achieved. Further, several systemic barriers such as lack of resources, cultural barriers, and shortage of the health workforce, add to the complexities of providing quality ECCE services. There was a clear call for more integrated and accessible services: local healthcare support, regular health screenings, and enhanced teacher training. "One of the most significant challenges is to overcome the impediments that are posed by cultural and linguistic differences to efficient communication amongst schools, families, and communities." (*Participant 2*).

Conclusion

It is concluded from the finding of this study that family participation and early healthcare provisions in overcoming the challenges faced in Early Childhood Care and Education in South Punjab are important. Integration of healthcare services with education and targeted efforts at creating awareness and support are likely to make a great difference in the lives of young children. The developmental needs of children can be generally met by public sector schools in South Punjab by creating an environment that fosters more engagement between families and their children and in turn provides for early health screenings and interventions. Moreover, teaching strategies need to be adapted to meet the diverse cognitive, social, and emotional needs of children to create a well-rounded learning experience. Holistic approaches, such as differentiated instruction and social-emotional learning, can better prepare children for school and life. Moving forward, it is essential to focus on improving accessibility to resources, providing community-based support, and addressing systemic barriers to enhance ECCE outcomes in the region.

While this study provides crucial insights into the challenges of ECCE in the South Punjab public sector, its findings remain limited by two major constraints: private ECCE providers have been excluded from consideration, as have parent perspectives which otherwise offer alternative challenges and successes, and the systematic bias ensuing from self-reported data that may highlight the failures but forgets to mention the local success stories. To fill such gaps and strengthen the evidence base, it is important that further studies should consider three key areas of research into: (1) regional comparisons to identify the reason for better ECCE outcomes in some districts such as Bahawalnagar; (2) intervention pilots

that simultaneously test specific practical solutions like mobile ECCE units in high-need areas such as Rajanpur, while measuring changes in enrollment and learning outcomes in a rigorous manner; and (3) extensive parental involvement through focus groups and community dialogues in order to better understand and address cultural obstacles inhibiting ECCE participation, especially within rural and conservative communities that may be the strongest in their resistance.

Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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