

Developing Child Friendly Environment In Early Childhood Education Classrooms In Pakistan

Khush Funer Murtaza

Professional Development Centre North
Institute for Educational Development
Aga Khan University
Pakistan

E.mail: khushfuner@pdcn.edu.pk

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Abstract

Among all levels of education, Early Childhood Education and Development (ECEd) is considered to be the most critical level for social (relationship to others), emotional (self-image and security), cognitive (thinking and reasoning) and physical development of children. Therefore, the teachers of early years need to play a significant role in the teaching and learning process through providing a friendly environment in their schools.

The study employed a case study approach. Information was gathered through a combination of methods, which included classroom observations, field notes, document analysis, focus group and semi structured interviews. The focus group participants and the interviewees were selected from a variety of stakeholders, which included parents, students, teachers and head teachers from public sector to get a comprehensive and representative analysis. Informal conversations with different stakeholders and self reflections contributed to clarify different aspects of the issues and findings. In this study I explored teachers' role in developing child friendly environment in ECE classrooms. Thus, two female ECE classroom teachers from a public secondary school in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan were the primary participants of the study and they taught in early setup.

The study revealed that institutional support and monitoring teachers' personal propensity to learning for improving pupils' learning, the prior ECED learning experiences and pedagogical content knowledge play an important role in engaging teachers in developing their thinking and teaching practice. The contribution of this thesis is that institutional and socio cultural influences are local, and derive from the Pakistani context, so have a particular significance for designing teacher development programs.

Keywords: Child Friendly Environment, Early Childhood Education and Development, Holistic Development, Professional Development Centre North, Aga Khan University,

Introduction

The age of ECED is very critical for young children's holistic development (social, emotional, cognitive and physical). Therefore, many countries have substantial investment in the early years of children's education. Several world organizations and forums have also emphasized the provision of equal opportunities for young children for their growth and development. However, in ECE, emphasis is placed on the holistic development of children.

In the 1980s, an additional dimension i.e. 'care' was added to ECE/ECD to broaden its frame work. Later on, it was referred to as Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). Various academics, practitioners and policy makers use different terms such as Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) according to their preferences, orientations and purposes. Nevertheless, the current emphasis of an ECE seems to be more on the holistic development of children by using a multidisciplinary approach to meet children's needs in the areas of health, nutrition, care and education. Development and education are considered to be essential dimensions of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED). Development is considered as a process of change in which children learn through interactions with adults, objects and environment. Similarly, learning is considered as a key part of the development process and the outcome of children's development. Therefore, ECED programs are important for the holistic development of children. Such programs can enhance physical well being and motor development, social and emotional development, language development and basic cognitive skills. Early years education helps children get the best possible start in life. It gives them a firm foundation for future success in school, socially and emotionally.

But unfortunately in Pakistan, not enough research work has been done on ECED. The reason behind it is that, in general, most of the developing countries and particularly, in Pakistan people are not aware about the importance of this significant concept. Even at ministry level they give more attention to primary education rather than giving importance to ECE. Realizing the role and significance of ECE, especially its impact on learning achievement, provision was made in the National Education Policy (1998-2010) to reintroduce "Katchi" as a formal class in primary schools, thereby extending the number of primary education years. However, the implementation process has not started yet due to scarcity of resources. Pakistan's priority area is primary education (5-9 age groups). Once the target of Universal Primary Education (UPE) is achieved, the next priority area may be Early Childhood Care and Development (UNESCO, Education for All 2000).

This research was conducted in the specific social and cultural context of Pakistan to seek answers to the following research question:

- How do teachers play their role in developing child friendly environment in Early Childhood Education classrooms of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan?

Thus, this research provides a unique contribution to the pool of existing literature, which deals with understanding the underlying child friendly environment and its deep rooted influences on the practices of ECE teachers in a non Western cultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing the existing literature, I found that various authors have defined child friendly environment based on their own perspectives and views. However, the embedded message in each is not very different. For instance, "Child friendly environment aims to develop a

learning environment in which children are motivated and able to learn. Staff members are friendly and welcoming to children and attend to all their health and safety needs” (Young, 2002, p. 18).

Learning begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. A child who develops well physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and intellectually during the early years is more likely to be a happy and productive member of the society than one who does not. Children whose basic health, nutritional and psycho-social needs are being met will develop and perform better than those less fortunate.

More related to the context of this particular research Mustard (2002) posit that poor development during early childhood years affects key aspects of brain development. For example, it affects all body tissues during life including the immune system, and the brain development influences the cognition, imagination, behavior and skills. Children can get all these skills when they have a friendly environment in their school and only the teachers can create this environment if they are competent and knowledgeable. Therefore, the role of the practitioners and teachers in early childhood education is complex and teachers have to keep pace with the current knowledge and teaching strategies on an ongoing basis. The educational, social and cultural changes require teachers to equip themselves with the required skills, knowledge and teaching techniques to be more effective in their profession. Bath (1990, p. 49) postulates that, ‘probably nothing in the school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self confidence or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers’.

The classroom is not simply a place in which students learn academic lessons. It is a social context in which students learn social lessons such as friendship, cooperation and appropriate behaviour. All this takes place provided a teacher has the capacity to attract the students by demonstrating care and making the classroom fun for young children (Lee, 2006). According to Edgington (1998) the starting point of making the classroom child friendly is to capture the interest of a child and then to sustain and extend it. This can lead to curiosity among the children for further learning.

In a child friendly environment, the most important thing for teachers is viewing children as competent and strong rather than needy and weak. In such a situation teachers avoid corporal punishment because they believe that it is very dangerous for children. Similarly, Jamal (2007) believes that physical punishment hinders learning and causes irreparable psychological damage, including confidence and self esteem. (Kaplan, 2006) adds that corporal punishment has negative emotional effects. It can cause depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems. The writer further elaborates that those who were beaten in their childhood were more prone to suicide, violence against others and criminal activity. This shows that corporal punishment not only hurts a child’s body but also it causes mental torture and damages the whole personality of a child. This violence can be curtailed or eliminated through laws enacted by the state, mutual cooperation between parents and teachers and proper training of teachers.

The attitudes of teachers and students are also very important in a child friendly environment. They have to be friendly towards the children. Practitioners working with young children set the scene for the emotional environment that the children play in. It is important that they are able to represent a secure world in which children are encouraged to take risks knowing that they will be supported if necessary (Skinner, 2007).

Similarly, studies in none-Western contexts have also proved the importance of child friendly environment. Yunus, (2003) maintains, "Giving the right opportunities and the right learning environment, children will develop in similar ways whatever their background has (p. 110). Therefore, it is important to give more opportunities for young children to learn in a better way.

Likewise parental involvement in ECED is significant. Dean, (2000) said,

"If most of a child's education happens outside school, especially in the home, and if parents are co-educators of the child with teachers, then it seems logical to make the two elements of school learning and home learning compatible, and for teachers to use that home learning as a resource" (p. 140).

It is true that parents who give more time to their children, their home learning takes place well and children learn in a better way. Stern, (2003) supports Dean's ideas and said, "Parents are the children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years' setting, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning" (p. 78).

Finally, in order to further understand the nature of child friendly environment Click (1998) argues that in a developmentally appropriate child care environment children can enhance their cognitive abilities as they are active participants in the development of their own intelligence. In order to do that, the environment must invite participation and offer a wide variety of choices. Children must be free to explore and discover, to hypothesize and experiment to increase their knowledge about the world around them. Each area in the classroom must include space for children to work comfortably and to have their materials close at hand (Sadu, 2004).

This study strives to further investigate the nature, function and influence of child friendly environment in ECED classes in a Pakistani school.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The social world of human beings is composed of a complex array of realities that are highly context bound and in a flux (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 181). Tajik (2004) says that "the social world in which we live, breathe, and acts ever-changing, multidimensional, and therefore, very complex" (p. 62). If realities are complex and context-bound then studying the life world of human beings would need a research approach which is scientifically rigorous and yet sensitive to these complex realities. A phenomenological approach may be employed to study a social phenomenon (Van, 1997). This means that studying a social phenomenon needs a qualitative approach that takes the researcher into the very heart of the research setting to describe, analyze and draw conclusions of the research participants and their world. Hence, a qualitative approach to this study was adopted as the most appropriate course of action. Within this particular qualitative approach, a comparative case study method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was deemed to be most beneficial.

In addition, data was collected through a combination of tools, which included observations, document analysis, field notes, focus group and semi structured interviews. The focus group participants and the interviewees were selected from a variety of stakeholders, which included parents, students, teachers and head teachers from public sector to get a comprehensive and representative analysis. Informal conversations with different

stakeholders and self reflections contributed to clarify different aspects of the issues and findings. The approach of using multiple methods or data sources in research is called 'triangulation' (Cohen, 2000), which enables a greater understanding of complex human behaviour and provides multiple perspectives, (Denscombe, 1998).

Research Context

This research was conducted in one of the cooperating schools of Aga Khan University-Professional Development Centre North (AKU-PDCN) located in its close proximity. It is a public school and is one of the largest schools in the region with one thousand female students and thirty teachers (four male and twenty six female). The school has ten levels; (two sections for each level) graded as pre-primary, primary, middle and secondary. The rationale for selecting this school was that it is a unique public school which has a strong interest and preference for ECED classes, which provides a better chance of finding rich data about child friendly ECED classes (Edgington, 1998).

Research Methodology

Themes were focused to extract the data. The study employed the process of organizing, general sense making, coding, drawing themes, and, finally, interpreting and making meaning out of the collected data (Cresswell, 2003). The research participants were informed about the nature, purpose, time and methods involved in the study. Moreover, each participant has a right to see the interview transcripts for any clarification in their views. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms for each research participant, and their school related data, is used.

Discussion

As suggested by the literature, that child friendly environment is considered a significant source in children's better learning in ECED classes. This research seeks to explore this understanding within a Pakistani context. While an analysis of the data suggests the presence of a number of facilitating factors, due to the structural limitations of this publication only some significant areas: (i) personal profile and (ii) facilitating factors will be considered. Hence, only data associated with child friendly environment will be discussed. In addition, this discussion will seek to describe how each of these facilitating factors led to the establishment of child friendly environment in ECED classrooms.

1) Ms. Deeya's profile and teaching experiences

Deeya is a young lady with an Intermediate's degree (grade 12 pass). She is a dedicated and hard working teacher. Deeya likes teaching young children from the beginning and this is why she decided to work in ECED classes. She is twenty five years old and has been teaching in the same school for the last three years.

2) Ms. Sonia's profile and teaching experiences

Sonia is a relatively young lady aged between twenty five and thirty. She has attended various courses about teaching young children. She likes to teach in Early Childhood Education because she loves young children. She also holds an Intermediate diploma and has been

teaching for the last five years. In this school she has taught for only one year having spent the rest of her teaching career in another school.

From the whole process it appears that teachers (the research participants) were in favor of child friendly environment. They tried to understand and provide students a friendly environment. In the process they explained and defined what a child friendly environment is? Deeya said,

It is an environment where young children come to school with joy and happiness. They live in a peaceful and comfortable place where they share their ideas and experiences with other colleagues. They also involve in various hands on activities and learn independently (Interview, 7th May, 2007).

Sonia had the same perceptions about child friendly environment and said,

It is a kind of environment where young children do not feel fear and hesitate to come to school from their homes. In such an environment where they can share their feelings and experiences confidently and their overall development has taken place (Interview, 10th May, 2007).

In addition, she mentioned, "An environment where children can share their feelings, experiences frankly and confidently. They can trust with each other and share their concerns in an effective manner" (Interview 12th May, 2007).

It is evident from the above definitions that a child friendly environment encourages teachers to enhance students' learning. In such an environment students can share their ideas; they can interact, ask questions, and provide support to each other. This kind of environment supports students to improve their learning. In such an environment teachers perceive children as a very important part of the environment. They encourage students to share their ideas with their colleagues and participate equally in all activities which they have in their classrooms. They also share their concerns and problems confidently and try to find solutions with the support of adults. In other words it gives an opportunity to enhance individuals' learning and they can develop further.

Moreover, teachers also said that child friendly environment increased the students' motivation, and even those students who did not take interest in their studies initially. They started to take interest and tried to find out solutions, if they faced any problems. While sharing her experiences Deeya also repeatedly cited that whenever she provided a friendly environment, students' participation increased which really made her happy. Similarly Sonia had the same comments and feelings that because of friendly environment most of the students participated in the lesson which really fascinated her.

On the basis of these observations and experiences I can say that both the teachers had a fairly similar conception of child friendly environment. They both frequently mentioned the friendly environment and tried to provide it for their children.

They further stressed some other factors which facilitate child friendly environment, for instance,

collaborative work helps teachers and students to develop themselves. In collaborative work e.g. reflection, feedback, co-teaching, co-planning, and discussions are helpful for teachers' learning. Hopkins et al (1998) further support collaborative work and state, "Teacher development takes place most effectively in a school where there is a culture of collaboration (p. 482)."

Both of the teachers strongly felt that young children learn better when they use concrete materials in ECE classroom. They manipulate the materials, play and observe them with different angles which help them learn more and more. While talking about a child friendly environment, Deeya said, "We encourage students to participate in different activities. They share their ideas, listen to each other, and work in groups" (Interview, 8th May, 2007).

Soniya has also the same feelings and notions about her experiences and said,

We always try to provide child friendly environment for our students. For instance, we encourage them to express their ideas freely. We also provide them different materials to play and work in pairs and groups. Therefore, we have established learning areas in our classrooms. The purpose of these areas is to provide an environment where children can play and manipulate with materials; they can use these materials for their learning (Interview 10th May, 2007).

The purpose of providing all these things is to provide a friendly and conducive environment where children will improve their own learning through a variety of activities. In such kind of environment children learn in a better way. Hence, it is important to provide them all the materials for their better learning and understanding.

Both of the teachers agreed that they use meaningful and relevant activities in various learning areas. Without these activities students do not take interest. Thus, I think that while preparing activities teachers need to think about students' abilities, because they have different abilities and levels of understanding. Soniya maintained,

We have different abilities of students, for example, slow learners and fast learners. According to their abilities teachers need to prepare activities which involve all the learners and engage them fully in the learning process. No one should be free without doing anything (Interview 12th May, 2007).

The school culture particularly in pre-primary section seems to reflect many of these points both teachers uphold. They appear to favor child friendly environment in ECED classes. Consequently, their particular school culture upholds the teaching in ECED classes as a prominent profession. Deeya stated,

ECED classes are considered foundation classes in formal schooling and it plays a vital role in young children's development. If children get good environment in this age, it effects their whole life. Thus, it is very important to provide a friendly environment for them (Interview 14th May, 2007).

Establishing a collegial relationship between the teachers was an important part of the process, because, without a sense of collegial relationship professional learning may not occur

properly. Little (1990, p. 531), talking about the influence of collegiality on professional relations says, "the various forms of teacher exchange that pass as collegiality comprise fundamentally different conceptions of teachers' professional relations. 'Weak' and 'strong' versions collegial relations plausibly produce or sustain quite different conditions of teacher performance and commitment".

Thousand, Villa & Nevin (1994, p. 40) say further,

"Cooperative and collaborative learning promotes creative thinking by increasing the number of ideas, feelings of stimulating and enjoyment, and originality of expression in creative problem solving".

Both participants also agreed that good relationship and trust building between colleagues, teachers and principal are very important for better learning. Learning does not take place without them. So it is crucial to establish a healthy and warm environment where teachers can get support and encouragement, because in such an environment they can discuss with their colleagues, share their problems and try to solve each others' problems through collaboration and cooperation. Teachers are personally involved in different activities, which help them to enhance their learning.

After interviewing and discussing with the teacher another significant facilitating factor was the role of the system (Government Education Department). If it wants to support schools and teachers, it can work without any disturbance. As Deeya mentioned in her interview

I always try to provide different materials for my children in ECE classroom. Among these materials some are low cost and some are ready made materials which I buy from the bazaar. If our system does not provide us material and support, it is difficult for us to buy ourselves because we do not have sufficient salaries from where we could contribute. We are also very thankful to our department which has nominated our school as an ECE school in the whole region and which provides us various materials. We use these materials in our classrooms for better teaching and learning (Interview 7th May, 2007).

The other significant point which has rightly come out from the interview is that most of the teachers are not well qualified or trained particularly in ECE schools. Teachers and head teachers think that the support system plays a vital role in ECE classrooms in terms of providing materials and training opportunities for teachers. As Sonia said, "

Our system cooperates with us very well. Every time whenever we require any sort of teaching materials we buy for our children. We had budget for our schools which we utilized with support of our head teacher for classroom materials.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I can say that in the process of education, early childhood education is the blossoming stage of human personality. The development fostered during this period acts as a frame and foundation on which the superstructure of an individual's personality is built (Sadu, 2004). Realizing this fact, the National Education Policy 1998-2010 recognized ECE as crucial for reducing dropout rate of students at primary level and a powerful means to eliminate poverty in the long run. The new idea (ECE) had not reached the implementation

level when the government of that time introduced another plan (2001-2011) called the National Plan of Action (NPA) in the support of its agenda to revamp and modernize the education with special emphasis on early education (ICG international crises group 2004). The plan, along with its suggested strategies, was; of course, smart in theory but on a practical level it was not implemented properly.

Likewise, in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan, the teacher community feels that child friendly environment is very important in ECED setup. It is basic foundation stage where children can develop their skills when they get a friendly environment. Both the participants of this study strongly believed in the concept of child friendly environment in ECE classrooms. They also tried their level best to develop such an attractive environment and were a good source of documenting and recording their practical work and learning. Yet although each of the participant teachers in this study displayed a strong connection with ECED children and teaching, the study also concludes that ECED teachers in Pakistan may need to reflect on and understand how their classroom environments and behaviors are likely to influence students' learning. They need to reflect on what strategies and skills should they apply to develop child friendly environment in the schools of the region.

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