

National Education Policy 2021 & Recommendations for Early Childhood Education

Policy Consultation for Recommendations (22 January 2021) moderated by ITA led by 9 Eminent Panelists¹ and attended by 120 participants

Higher and consistent investment in Foundational Learning is compulsory for sustainable literacy and numeracy, and educational, social and economic rights. The vision for lifelong learning beginning from conception to 8 years (0-8) is established as an important pillar in education policy and planning. When investment falls short at this stage, it triggers the crisis of learning, and 'Learning Poverty' for all 10 year old (in and out of school). Pakistan's learning poverty estimates at 75% compared to 58% in South Asia (WB 2019) is a case in point. The learning losses have been further exacerbated, due to prolonged school closures during Covid-19. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2021 is a welcome opportunity to revisit our commitment and vision for Early Childhood Education (ECE) or preferably Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a holistic and foundational sub-sector; its natural logic connects parents/caregivers and teachers; homes and schools in a grounded and meaningful manner. The Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training's (MoFE&PT) open call for fast-track public inputs to the proposed NEP 2021, provided a good space for discussions/consultations at the provincial and national level.

The ambition to Leave No Child Behind, fulfilling the fundamental right to education (RTE) or article 25 A of the Constitution must begin by giving early attention to, and action for ECCE holistically. In Pakistan, the challenges facing the education sector of governance, accountability, quality, access, equity and inclusion will be reversed. [The anchor reference documents for the upcoming NEP 2021 and ECCE include:](#)

- the Constitution and 25 A as a fundamental right, for all children 5-16 years of age, its 5 laws/acts
- the Education Sector Plans of all provinces and areas of Pakistan including ECCE Policies/Standards, and implementation evidence
- the ECE Single National Curriculum (2020) and ECE Provincial Curricula/Standards/Workforce Recruitment and Preparation documents
- the manifestoes of political parties with respect to education and ECE
- Past NEPs (including draft NEP 2017) covering ECE
- SDGs 2030 and in particular SDG 4 /SDG 4.2 on Education/ECE and SDG 5 on Gender Equality
- International Covenants and Commitments by the Govt. of Pakistan on Education, Disability, Child Rights, Women Rights and Elimination of All forms of Violence, Child Labor and its Worst forms
- Rose P. and Zuberi A (2019) Bright & Early: How Financing pre-primary education gives every child a fair start in life. Moving towards quality early childhood development for all. Their World
- UNESCO (2021) Right to pre-primary education: a Global Study

¹ Dr. Shenila Bhamani, Dr. Amna Ansari, Dr. Yasmeen Mehboob, Mr. Abdal Mufti, Ms. Arooj Saqib, Ms. Shahpara Rizvi, Mr. Rashid Aziz, Mr. Lire Ersado

In recent years, the call for Universal ECCE as a priority area for investment and action comes with a compelling logic that has influenced RTE laws in Pakistan. Three out of five provincial laws (ICT, Sindh, Punjab) on Right to Education/25 A are strongly committed to providing early years schooling. ECE/ECCE policies, standards, and curricula were instituted across Pakistan's provinces in the previous decade, including Sindh (2015) and Punjab (2017). The ECE Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2020 builds upon the learning outcomes derived from the provincial curricula. The upcoming NEP 2021 must continue and upgrade these efforts. The MoFE&PT's thought paper on NEP 2021 delineates ECE as one of the four pillars on which the education system is to be built, with accompanying financing and governance. However, the policy must address several principles of provision and support of ECCE within Pakistan.

Early Years Education is an imperative investment with so many multipliers: The anchor investment in early years 0-8 converges with the challenges and opportunities for health, nutrition, population and education. ECCE must thus be accorded pivotal importance in collaboration with the Ministries/Depts of Health, Nutrition, Planning Development & Reforms Initiatives, Scaling up Nutrition in Pakistan, NADRA/CRC/Birth Registration, Ehsaas/BISP and Education. The multisectoral interface approach focusing on health, nutrition, play, learning and protection must be supported coherently across ministries multiplying benefits for mothers, children and families at the foundational levels and lifelong learning meeting many core targets of SDGs and of the Govt. of Pakistan.

The 0-8 years focus needs a collaborative and holistic approach: 0-3 years is led primarily by the Ministry/dept of Health/Nutrition; 3-5 and 6-8 years is primarily led by the Ministry/Dept of Education from ECCE to Lower Primary level ensuring solid readiness and transition support working closely with parents/caregivers.

ECCE 3-8 years requires 10% of Education Financing from the current abysmal low levels of 1-3% of total budgets for education across provinces and federal areas covering: facilities, equipment, workforce, training and support, monitoring and research.

ECCE is to be measured across 4 domains with well-defined indicators:

- Literacy and numeracy;
- Physical
- Social Emotional Care &
- Learning (UNICEF 2020)/annex

Some key suggestions and pivots for ECCE in Pakistan are shared below.

- **Early Years Education as a Constitutional Right:** Given three out of the five provincial laws on the constitutional Right to Education are strongly committed to providing early years schooling, there is an urgency of incorporating ECCE into the Constitution or as Article 25 b, Right to Early Childhood Care & Education; giving coverage to All 0-5 years children (Article 25 A covers 5-16 years)
- **There is an Urgent need for a National Task Force/Commission on ECCE that is multi-sectoral/holistic with experts and practitioners from across Pakistan.**

- **Utilizing Recent Research in Early Years for “Learning” and “Play Based Learning”:** Considering the scope of its ambition, NEP 2021 must engage with new insights in content and approaches for early years with multiple spillover benefits:
 1. **Child learning:** Executive function which has now been termed as the ‘learning’ domain is critical, demonstrating conclusively that competencies of cognitive control, self-regulation, and work memory must be integrated into the curriculum for child development as a key building block for positive learning outcomes and lifelong learning
 2. **Play-based learning (PBL):** As recent research shows, play-based learning with parents/ caregivers and teachers is meaningful, iterative, joyful, socially interactive, and engaging manner for children, enabling the development of a wide range of skills. PBL must be incorporated into the ECCE SNC, standards, workforce preparation and facilities/ learning environment as integral to ECCE in Pakistan, and not as an isolated side-activity.
 3. **Supporting Research and Tracking of ECCE interventions** to further improve systems and programs for ECCE.
- **Inclusive Education:** Inclusive Education has become a key priority nationally and globally with a growing recognition of the multiple dimensions of inclusion— ability, gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, refugee status etc. While the SNC 2020 and earlier documents highlight ways in which IE can be achieved, there is silence on disabilities where early detection, support and referrals, must be part of the integrated education for children with disabilities/ (CWDs) estimated at 15.5% (ASER 2018).
- **Medium of Instruction/Mother Tongue Teaching and Localization:** There is compelling evidence to ensure MTT for early years/ECCE for improved social emotional learning, cognitive engagement and growth. This shift needs coordinated investment for material development and pedagogical preparation of teachers in using mother tongue/local languages for teaching/learning. MTT must be institutionalized as a principle of practice across Pakistan facilitating improved learning and lifelong learning.
- **ECCE Cadre, Recruitment & Preparation (pre and in-service) with school-based support:** The above suggestions and holistic /inclusive support for ECE requires teachers/assistants/ planners who are well acquainted with the science, art and practice of ECE. Currently Sindh is the only province with new cadre for ECE Teachers (BPS 15); in Punjab the AEOs support the ECE initiative province wide at the cluster level (10 schools per AEOs). There must be an ECCE workforce cadre fully notified with TORs in place across the country. ECCE must be part of the pre-service professional development programs (B.Ed 4 years) and 1 year diplomas to make up for teacher shortages in this sub-sector. There is thus an urgency for policy action in this critical area. The post-Covid framework must also focus on the mental well-being of students, introducing EQ as an imperative quality for teachers, pro-active parental involvement.
- **Nutrition, Child Protection, and Intersectoral Coordination:** Child care, nutrition, health protection and nurturing are equally important with as fundamental components of a good ECCE program design. The NEP 2021 must ensure principles of inter-departmental coordination for ECCE through trained planners/policy makers. The NEP 2021 must acknowledge and link with ongoing programs of Scaling

Up nutrition Ehsas Nashonuma for social protection systematically; these are important initiatives to be leveraged in ECCE services in schools.

- **Implementation Mechanisms and Duration of ECCE:** NEP 2021 must acknowledge and incorporate lessons from provincial ECCE policies, standards, curriculum and implementation initiatives. There is a need for a 2-years progressive ECCE programme (3-5 years) covering a wide range of outcomes in 4 domains of ECCE. While the ECE SNC 2020 also recognizes the need for a 2-year programme, it does not explicitly specify it as mandatory. There needs to be policy coherence for a nation-wide roll-out in ECCE linked to lower primary up to 8 years of age. The sub-sector must be tracked through the agreed indicators /report cards that are reflected in NEP 2021 targets monitoring as well as that of SDG 4.2.2 and other related targets/indicators.
 - Selection of local, provisional and federal level committee on merit basis rather than snowballing
 - Inclusion of experts from nurturing care framework
 - nurturing care framework to be part of curriculum framework
 - Early years teacher licensing

Annex 4 :

Construction of the individual domain scores and total ECDI

The overall ECDI score is calculated based on separate measures in each of the four developmental domains. Every surveyed child is identified first as being on track in each of the four domains. If three out of the four domains are on track, the child is considered to be on track overall (or ECDI = 1). At the country level, aggregated results are calculated separately for each of the four domains, and the total ECDI (ranging from 0–1) is constructed as the proportion of children who are developmentally on track in at least three of the four domains.

Responses to 10 questions (EC8–EC17) are used to determine whether children are developmentally on track in four domains:

(1) **Literacy-numeracy** – Developmentally on track if at least two of the following are true: EC8=1 (Can identify/name at least ten letters of the alphabet), EC9=1 (Can read at least four simple, popular words), EC10=1 (Knows the names and recognizes the symbols of all numbers from 1 to 10)

(2) **Physical** – Developmentally on track if one or both of the following are true: EC11=1 (Can pick up a small object with two fingers, like a stick or a rock from the ground), EC12=2 (Is not sometimes too sick to play)

(3) **Social-emotional** – Developmentally on track if at least two of the following are true: EC15=1 (Gets along well with other children), EC16=2 (Does not kick, bite or hit other children), EC17=2 (Does not get distracted easily)

(4) **Approaches to learning** – Developmentally on track if one or both of the following are true: EC13=1 (Follows simple directions on how to do something correctly), EC14=1 (When given something to do, is able to do it independently)

Total ECDI – Percentage of children who are developmentally on track in at least three of the four domains (literacy-numeracy, physical, social-emotional and approaches to learning).

Source: Loizillon et al., (2017).

UNESCO (2021)