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## DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN PUNJAB: AN INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY CURRICULUM, PRACTICES AND TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Play is an important part of the preschool curriculum. This article describes in brief, play, types of play, levels of play, and the contribution of a well-managed play in a child's socio-emotional development. Play of various types requires effective management, proper organization, and an environment suitable for such activities. This environment enables children to play safely, happily and for the length of time, they desire. Present research entitled, "Role of effective Management of Play in Socio-emotional development at Preschool Level" identifies the developmental benefits of play in learners at a preschool level. The objectives of this research were twofold. The first objective was to study various types and settings for play in preschool classes. The second objective was to discuss and examine the suitability of play structure in pre-school education and its role in the socio-emotional development of the students. The researcher has delineated foci on the development of curriculum and functional beginning of play classes. This research was a mixed-method endeavor and an outcome of survey, discussions, meetings, literature review, and personal experiences of the researchers in Pakistan. The findings of the study were based on both quantitative and qualitative data related to the current situation existing in the country. The conclusions were drawn by merging both types of data. It was concluded after brainstorming that the learning achievement deficit in primary and secondary schools is due to the low quality of pre-school education. Moreover, the majority of public sector schools have very limited facilities for various kinds of play. Teachers have a limited perception of the importance of play and its role in socio-emotional development. It is the need of the hour to ascertain a balanced and comprehensive structure and curriculum for the fulfillment of the needs and requirements of a learner's overall development at ECE.

**Keywords:** *Play, Early childhood education, Pakistan, Socio-emotional development, Preschool Education*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Play is defined as an activity of a child done for the pursuit of social, psychological, emotional, or social amusements. Montessori (1975) defined it in a different way than play is a "child's work" According to Garvey (1977) "children's play is a kind of dialogue with their

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Play is defined as an activity of a child done for the pursuit of social, psychological, emotional, or social amusements. Montessori (1975) defined it in a different way than play is a “child’s work” According to Garvey (1977) “children’s play is a kind of dialogue with their environment.” Play is known to be a basic right of a child and has an important role in their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Early childhood educators and child development specialists like Francis, Jhonson, Chrisite, and Yawkey (1987) believe that play is the best way for young children to learn the concepts, skills, and tasks needed to set a solid foundation for later school and life success. They believe that play involves a free choice activity that is non-literal, self-motivated, and enjoyable, and process oriented.

According to Cohen and others 2005, socio-emotional development includes the expression and control over emotions by a child and a healthy relationship with others. It encompasses both intra and interpersonal processes. It is quite evident in the expert’s opinion that a child’s maximum socio-emotional development occurs between the age of two years and six years (Hayes, 1994, Garz, 2009). Play is the best source of socialization, learning of others, and negotiation. Motivation and availability of material not only engage a child in play but help in the all-round development of the child. Social development portrays children in the way they learn sharing, helping others, playing with peers of the same age, and showing cooperation. Emotional development refers to understanding and recognition of own feelings for, others. An emotionally stable person considers him and others at the same time and acts accordingly. Socio-emotional development is a foundation for other developmental tasks. At the same time, lack of interaction with others, lack of empathy, and attention may cause socio-emotional disorders. Core symptoms of these disorders include depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, and eating disorders. Infancy and childhood period are known to be the crucial stages for a child. The child goes through many changes in terms of socio-emotional development. Erikson, a famous psychologist emphasized that the socio-emotional development of a child progressed through various stages. Through this sequential process of development, they earn either a positive contribution or a conflict. According to Erikson, that conflict is very crucial in the attainment development goals of a child. The major reason for the conflict is the lack of contribution to the environment in terms of attitudes, ideas, and skills (Slater, 2003).

The same argument is given by Vygotsky, (1978) that culture plays a basic role in mastering specific abilities to form emotional stability. Another theory of moral development is given by Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist. Kohlberg felt that a child made progress in moral values slowly, by mastering each stage. Moral development can only be encouraged through discussions and consensus. A Child learns these rules in groups through cognitive reasoning and it helps him to progress from one stage to another (Kohlberg 1987). Ghafoor and Khan (1994) elaborated it quite clear that in Pakistan a mother is illiterate and the father has no time to give to his children as he is supposed to earn. So a child’s early mental, social, psychological development is done in school; but it is a reality that public and private sectors both are far behind to fulfill their responsibilities of providing a better curriculum and environment for the growth of early childhood learners. Government statistics show that there are 19 million children of age band 5-9 years in Pakistan out of which 6 million are not enrolled in any school. 45% of the enrolled learners would drop out without completing their cycle of early education. (National Educational policy Review, January 2006, P. 6). Through these various experts’ opinions, one thing is obvious that play contains distinguishing characteristics. One characteristic of play is that it is voluntary so children can choose it freely and in the manner, they wish to play it. The second characteristic of play is

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that children are internally motivated to play rather than given an external direction. According to Johnson and Erschler (2008), “the reason why children keep themselves busy in play is that it gives them satisfaction.”

The third characteristic of play is that the process and activity itself is more important for children rather than the result or certain end. The basic purpose of the study was to probe the current situation and environment of ECE. The present study tried to analyze the play activities deeply and present practicable suggestions for the future development of ECE in Pakistan. ECE is the responsibility of the parents, (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, (2004)) so families can play a vital role in basic development and nourishment (UNICEF, 2007). However, the responsibility is now shifted to the ECE institutions worldwide due to the new and busy life routines of the parents. The growing demand for ECE and services put pressure on the government to review and improve the policy, budgetary funds, and services. (Miller, 2002) In Pakistan, traditionally a four-year child was allowed to join as an unregistered student and was placed in Kachi class. Kachi class was considered a pre-primary class but recognized in the 1970's policy. Official recognition of the Kachi class, its admission, curriculum, and promotion was first introduced in the education policy of 1992, Shami, (2005).

Ministry of Education took a few initiatives for the growth of ECE with the cooperation of the Private sector. These projects included PEP-ILE for the improvement of the learning environment, and this was supported by GTZ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pakistan is one of the signatories of DFA (Dakar Framework of Action 2000) and was bound to an agreement with 183 other countries in April 2000. One of the goals of this framework is about expansion and improvement of ECE. The EFA developed six goals for the elevation of literacy and primary education. The first objective was dedicated to the promotion of facilities and the structure of early childhood education.

According to the national Census 2017, the population of the 3-5 aged group was 14.61 Million and less than 47.0% were enrolled in the schools, Government of Pakistan, 2019. The situation is even worse in disadvantaged and vulnerable areas where mostly net enrollment is laying less than 20%.

According to the UNESCO 2014, Pakistan stands at the 2nd lowest position in the world as far as children without school are concerned. There are multiple factors behind the low promotion of literacy in Pakistan. Lack of funds, a fast-growing population, engagement in the war on terror, poverty, and gender disparities are the big obstacles in the way of meeting and protecting the rights of the children. Keeping in view the above scenario, there is a growing demand to review the National Education Policy regarding ECE. So it is important to study the current state of ECE in Pakistan to propose a new vision for future development and prospects of promotion. The following study was an endeavor to critically analyze the structure management, and practices of ECE in the Bahawalpur Division. This study would suggest and discuss improvisation to improve the effectiveness of ECE and provide viable and practicable suggestions for the improvement of play activities. The researcher would intentionally compare and elaborate educational conditions prevailing in the early education of Pakistan with the world.

## **2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- i. To study the perceptions of teachers about play and its role in learner's potential learning and growth.
- ii. To review the infrastructure and management of play activities at the preschool level.

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- iii. To suggest guidelines for establishing play curriculum and activities compatible with Pakistani cultural values and norms.

### 2.1 Research Questions

- i. What is the level of awareness among the teachers of early childhood education regarding the significance of play activities?
- ii. How best the ECE management incorporate play into schools?
- iii. How much the play activities are adult-led and provide opportunities that are equal, competitive and goal fostering?

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research was mixed-method type and based on, surveys, observations, and discussions. A self-developed questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and systematic observation were used tools for data collection. The practical aspect of the study demanded a deep insight into the phenomenon so a mixed method was adopted to get detailed information. Qualitative and quantitative data sets were merged to get a comprehensive and holistic view of the problem and to find out a more realistic and logical answer to the research question.

This research was delimited to the division of Bahawalpur. All three districts, Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan, and Bahawalnagar were included in the study. All the teachers and headteachers of public sector primary and elementary schools were the population of the study. A total of 314 teachers and headteachers were selected as a sample of the study. The sample was selected through a multi-stage sampling technique. As shown in the table no 1, 94 schools were selected in the first stage, through stratified sampling, and then 314 respondents were selected through systematic random sampling. Quantitative data were collected through the personal administration of the questionnaire. Opinions of respondents were calculated on a five-point Likert scale. Interviews were conducted through face to face interaction, after getting a telephonic appointment. Interview questions were developed to verify the results of the questionnaire. Frequencies, percentage, mean score, and standard deviation were calculated. The significance of data sets was calculated through a sample t-test. Quantitative data were verified and compared with qualitative data results, and similar findings were merged and conclusions were drawn.

#### 3.1 Sample of the Study

Table 1. *Sample population and geographical distribution*

Sr.	Districts	Schools	No Teachers	No of Head Teachers	Total	
1	Bahawalpur	Urban	19	59	4	63
		Rural	17	54	3	57
2	Rahim Yar Khan	Urban	16	50	4	54
		Rural	13	41	3	44
3	Bahawalnagar	Urban	16	49	3	52
		Rural	13	41	3	44
-	-	Total= 94	294	20	314	

Table 1 illustrates the geographical distribution of the sampled population. The selected sample schools from Bahawalpur Districts were 19 in all from urban areas and 17 from rural areas, whereas 63 respondents from urban and 57 from rural area schools were selected. A total of 29 schools were designated from Rahim Yar Khan District as a sample and 54 responders were selected from urban schools and 44 individuals were selected from rural

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areas. Total of 52 individuals were selected from urban areas and they were from 16 schools and 44 individuals were selected from 13 schools of rural areas of Bahawalnagar District.

#### 4 RESULTS

Table 2. *Teacher's Perceptions about play and its usefulness*

S No	Statement	F	M	SD	t-value	Sign.
1	Play is an important part of ECE curriculum.	314	1.31	.723	26.198	0.000
2	Play activities help in socio-emotional development of children.	313	1.52	.577	23.876	0.000
3	Play helps in physical development.	313	3.32	.671	27.162	0.000
4	Children need supervision and guidance of teacher for effective engagement.	313	3.43	.624	25.642	0.000
5	Play is affordable for schools.	314	1.22	.821	26.811	0.000
6	Play-based learning is not integral to healthy socio-emotional development.	311	3.45	.710	27.726	0.000
7	Play is a right of every child.	314	3.33	.689	25.871	0.000
8	You got training in organizing play based teaching.	312	0.91	.753	27.498	0.000
9	You are clearly informed about the objectives of play activities by the school administration.	311	0.41	.429	26.009	0.000
10	Social and language play are equally beneficial.	312	1.16	.674	27.091	0.000

Table 2 displays the perception of participants about play and its usefulness. Participants disagreed with the statement that 'play is an important part of ECE curriculum' and the mean score is 1.3, with a significant value of 0.000. Respondents showed disagreement with the statement that 'Play activities help in the socio-emotional development of the children' and mean score is 1.52 and the mean score is 1.3, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants agreed with the statement that 'Play helps in physical development' mean score is 3.32, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants agreed with the statement that 'Children need the guidance of a teacher for effective engagement, and mean score is 3.43, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants disagreed with the statement that 'Playing is affordable for the schools' and the mean score is 1.22, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants were agreed with the statement that 'Playing based learning is not essential to healthy socio-emotional development' and the mean score is 3.45, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants were agreed with the statement that 'Play is the right of every child' and the mean score is 3.33, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants disagreed with the statement that Training is forming in playing-based teaching and the mean score is 0.91, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants disagreed with the statement that they were informed about the purposes of different preschool activities by the school management and the mean score is 0.41, with a significant value of 0.000. Participants disagreed with the

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statement that language and social are beneficial equally and the mean score is 1.16, with a significant value of 0.000.

Table 3. *Availability and use of paly materials*

S. No	Statement	Frequencies	Mean	SD	t-value	Sign.
1	You have a playground/area in school for play.	312	2.11	.35	22.654	0.000
2	You have sufficient space for children.	312	1.09	.46	21.239	0.000
3	You have indoor play area.	313	1.20	.82	24.721	0.000
4	You have toys available for nursery classes.	310	0.09	.67	26.873	0.000
5	You organize play activities on daily basis.	313	0.67	.59	24.167	0.000
6	You supervise and guide students during play.	314	0.56	.81	23.281	0.000
7	Children have a choice to play according to their interest.	313	1.12	.67	27.811	0.000
8	Play time may be extended if students demand.	314	0.91	.69	25.621	0.000
9	Student's behavior is observed during play.	312	1.19	.62	24.761	0.000
10	Guidance is provided to the students with behavior problems.	312	2.19	.68	24.411	0.000
11	Motivation given to those who hesitate in participation.	314	1.03	.71	26.765	0.000
12	Students are satisfied with the time allocated for play.	311	1.16	.84	23.263	0.000
13	You have age appropriate materials.	312	1.02	.67	23.651	0.000
14	Materials and toys are accessible to children	312	1.27	.65	27.543	0.000
15	Children are allowed to move freely in play area.	314	0.76	.63	25.815	0.000

Table 3 displays the results on the availability and use of paly materials in ECE institutions in District Bahawalpur. According to the data majority of the respondents were disagreed with a mean score of 2.11 that school has a playing area or ground for children and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of the respondents showed their disagreement with the statement that sufficient space for children has available with the mean score, 1.09 and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The respondents did not agree that they have an indoor play area, with a 1.20 mean score and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The statement that 'Toys are available for playgroup classes' was not supported by the teachers with a mean score, 0.09 and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority did not agree with the statement that plays activities established on regular bases with a mean score of 0.67 and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. Respondents were not agreed with a mean score of 0.56 that students were supervised by the teachers during play activities and it has a significant value of 0.000. Many did not agree that Children have a choice to play according to their interest with a mean score of 1.12 and it has

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a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of respondents were not with the view that playing time is extended as per student's request with a mean score of 0.91 and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of the repliers disagreed with a mean score of 1.19 that children's behavior was observed during playing activity and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of the responder teachers disagreed that they provide guidance to the problematic students and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. Many disagreed that motivation is to all the students and its significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of the responding staff disagreed with the statement the students were happy with the allocated playtime for different activities with a mean score, 1.16 and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of teachers were unsatisfied with the appropriateness of materials for play, with a 1.02 mean score and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. Teachers disagreed that materials are reachable to their students and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000. The majority of respondents with a mean score, 0.67, were strongly disagreed that the teacher allows all the students to play freely and it has a significant value at a level of 0.000.

Table 4. *Suggestions for improvement in play activities*

S No	Suggestions	Total	Frequencies	Percentage
1	Facilities and materials should be improved.	301	256	85.04
2	Appropriate materials should be provided according to the age group.	301	244	81.06
3	Materials and toys should be accessible.	301	210	69.76
4	Special trainings should be provided to the teaching staff.	301	167	55.48
5	Class size should be minimizing.	301	155	51.49
6	Community and parents should be involved.	301	154	51.16
7	Local games and low cast materials should be introduced.	301	122	40.53
8	More budgets may be allocated for play activities.	301	121	40.19
9	Others	301	67	22.25

Table 4 illustrates the suggestions given by the respondents for improvement in play activities at ECE. According to the data, 85.04 % were in the view that facilities and materials should be improved. While 81.06 of the responders suggested that suitable materials should be provided to each age group of students. Materials that should be easily reachable for the students were suggested by 69.76% of the participants. The percentages were 55.48 of those who recommended superior pieces of training to the teachers for better teaching at the ECE level. 51.49% of the respondent proposed that class size should be minimized. Moreover, 51.16 % advised a community and parent's involvement in the ECE. Local games and low cast materials should be introduced and the percentages were 40.53. About 40.19% of people advocate more budget allocation for play activities.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The first objective of the study was to analyze the perceptions of teachers regarding the necessity and significance of play activities in ECE. Keeping the needs ECE, it is obvious that both material and human resources are vital for the development of children at this level. Teachers are known to be the key human resources at ECE institutions. According to the study teachers at the ECE level have poor perceptions regarding the necessity of play ECE. Many believe that play has little or no role in socio-emotional and creative development. The

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majority has a view that play has an impact on physical development and it is the basic right of every child to have an access to play activities. Many rely on the fact that they got no training and have even not been informed about the aims and objectives of play activities.

The second objective was to verify the availability of materials for play and their utilization and efficacy. The study confirmed that public sector schools are facing a massive shortage of materials for play activities. The majority of schools have no playgrounds and indoor play areas.

Play fosters the cognitive, creative, emotional, and social development of young children. Desirable outcomes for a pre-school child largely depend upon the play activity, its planning, and specifically organized environment to carry out these activities. Play is a voluntary, intrinsically motivated, and pleasurable activity. The present study confirmed that these guidelines are not followed. The rate of participation in the play activity is very low then simple reading and writing. Although there are various types of play like free play, guided play, play with objects, play with motion, dramatic play, and games, but students are given the opportunity for unattended free play. A teacher's role in play activities is most important. Teachers most likely, supervise, guide, and motivate the students for play. A recent paper confirmed that there is a lack of involvement of teachers in the play activities.

The third objective of the research was to gather the opinion of respondents about improvements in ECE. The majority of the respondents demanded that institutions of ECE must have time, space, and varied good-quality resources to fulfill the mental and physical needs of the learners. The school organization may include a wide variety of play experiences and a balance between teachers' and children's intentions. Autonomy should be given to learners in the choice of play and time. Many gave the opinion that children should have a right to move freely both in the playground and indoor play areas. Social and language play are low cost and very effective in social and cognitive skills. ECE institutions should use these types of play activities and try to harmonize the activities with local traditions and culture. Efforts should be made to promote child-friendly learning in the pre-primary levels through the available resources. Efforts should be made for the allocation of extra resources in the regular Government budgets.

The private sector may also be encouraged to participate in improvements in the learning environment for pre-school-aged children.

There must be refresher courses and pieces of training that may be designed at the national level and private sector teachers may also be given training as they are never given training of any level during their service.

### **5.1 Discussion**

Over the past few decades, the field of preschool education has been very popular all over the world. Pakistan is also focusing on preschool education in the spotlight along with the literacy and adult literacy campaign, but there is a need to do a lot. One of the major obstacles to a low level of ECE is the conceptual clarity of the need and importance of ECE. Steyn, Hannaway, & Hartell, (2014) highlighted the importance of positivity and perceptions of teachers and their relationship with the effectiveness of the ECE program. There is a lack of interest in policymakers and politicians, as the education sector was never been the priority of the government. The education system in the public sector is a dupe of sluggishness and outdated. This is a major cause of low esteem and ignorance among the teachers regarding the need and importance of ECE. Emily, Getha and Rubin, (2018) have the same view regarding the perception teachers at ECE institutions and its impact on the overall effectiveness of the ECE program. According to their research play-based learning largely



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depends upon the active and trained teacher, who knows how to form an active engagement platform for children.

There is also a growing interest in public/parents in the education of young children. This is a constant challenge for the managers and professionals of preschool education to determine what is best for the preschoolers and how this can effectively be implemented. The growth and development of a preschool age group demand a less restricting, colorful, and interesting environment and activities. The results of the study indicated that there is a huge shortage of various levels and variety of these activities for the physical, emotional, cognitive, moral, and social development of children. The same results were also presented by Syed, Asif, & Yousaf, (2011) about the missing facilities and lack of administrative will to encourage play at the ECE level.

Bennett (2001) also found in his study that in nursery classes, children like to have long periods in which remain engaged in play and self-directed activities. They learn several skills through play activities.

Early childhood care and its program is a less focused area of education in Pakistan. Although a short curriculum is developed for Katchi class still there is a need for much detailed program for the age-specific needs and interests of the young children. Many research studies and experts in the area strongly endorsed the need for a detailed syllabus. Zada, (2014) and Hunzai, (2009) argued that the private sector and local resources may be utilized for the promotion of play at ECE classrooms.

This gives the play an important place in the pre-school curriculum. That is why the planning of play curriculum requires careful consideration related to the nature of play and its relationship with the development of a young child.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

In the light of conclusions and discussions, it is recommended that playschools may be given an open chance to flourish and work with the spirit of change and adopt the following measures:

- The importance and significance of ECE need to be raised. Media can play its role in sensitizing the community at large and can be the best source of inspiration for all the stakeholders. The government of Pakistan should take initiative and organize various conferences, seminars, and training workshops for the awareness of ECE and its importance in parents, teachers, and administrators.
- The Play classes that are established must have time, space, and varied good-quality resources to fulfill the mental and physical needs of the learners. A proposed curriculum may be followed that is given in this article as it defines culturally diverse and relevant to the civic needs and realities of learners. Play should be enjoyable and intended for children, so the school administration should explore the liking of the children. These explored interests must be considered as the priority while planning the ECE program and schedules.
- Adequate resources should be allocated for early childhood programs separately and the private sector and corporate entities should also be encouraged to contribute their skills and donation for the promotion of local ECE institutions.
- There must be an initial compulsory training designed at the national level for public and private sector teachers. Training of teachers is a strong element in ECE for supervising a successful play program implementation.

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