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FACTORS AFFECTING HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS IN ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors that affect young children's overall development—such as thinking, speaking, and social skills—in a village near Islamabad, Pakistan. It highlights the importance of early childhood education in shaping a child's future. The research focused on whether children had any learning experience before preschool, how much parents know about education, the role of the community and politics, and how well school lessons support a child's full growth. To gather information, the researcher used forms, interviews, and classroom observations with 25 participants, including parents, teachers, and school leaders. The study also looked at parental involvement, teacher training, cultural influences, and efforts by the Pakistani government and organizations like UNICEF to improve early education. Early Childhood Education (ECE) supports children's growth from birth to age 8 in areas like thinking, emotions, movement, language, and social skills. It plays a vital role in preparing children for school and life. While Pakistan's National Education Policy (2009) recognizes the value of ECE, rural areas near Islamabad still face major challenges such as untrained teachers, poor facilities, and cultural barriers.

Keywords: Holistic Development, Preschool Education, Early Childhood Development, Socioeconomic Factors, Islamabad, Pakistan

Introduction

Parental involvement is also crucial. Many parents, especially in urban studies like Karachi, care about their children's health but lack awareness of their emotional and mental development. Parenting styles in Pakistan can often be too strict or too lenient, affecting how children learn and behave.

Parental stress is another concern. Financial pressure, gender roles, and low education especially among mothers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi—can lead to stress that impacts children's learning and behavior. During COVID-19, over half of parents with toddlers felt stressed, which negatively affected early learning.

Some programs, like Spring, are helping by guiding parents in child-friendly interactions. However, major issues remain. Many rural teachers are not trained in playful, age-appropriate teaching. Lessons often ignore children's cultural or language needs, and national education programs don't always match young children's real developmental stages. In Pakistan, parenting practices are deeply influenced by parents' education, financial situation, cultural norms, and personal beliefs. Even when guidance is available, many parents fail to understand how small compromises like enrolling children in low-quality schools—can impact their overall development (Majid, 2022). Parental involvement, such as reading books or engaging in educational activities with children, plays a significant role in improving language and literacy skills. However, this requires commitment from parents, teachers, and community leaders (Ahmad, Zaheer, & Khan, 2021).

Early childhood education in Pakistan, particularly in government schools, remains weak despite global recognition of its importance. Challenges such as funding shortages, inefficient systems, and cultural constraints prevent many children under eight from receiving the support they need to thrive (Malik & Naeem, 2020). In rural Islamabad, schools face unequal access to education. A UNESCO report revealed that Pakistan has the second highest number of out-of-school children about seven million mainly due to a lack of teachers and basic resources, affecting both academic learning and personal growth (UNESCO, 2014).

Safe, nurturing, and playful learning environments are essential for young children's development. Teachers who show warmth and patience are more effective in using creative, play-based methods, which support emotional, social, and cognitive growth (Bubikova & Hanne, 2019; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; McGrath & Huntington, 2007). Parents' views and involvement are also critical. Dewan (2015) emphasized that children should be treated as individuals with their own emotions. A study in Punjab showed that many parents were concerned about poor communication with teachers, lack of play spaces, and the need for more caring teachers (Malik, Khalid, Malik, & Asghar, n.d.).

Family income and parental education levels significantly affect access to quality preschools. Children from low-income households often face limited opportunities for mental and emotional development (Khan et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic made things worse, especially in rural areas where digital access was limited and teachers were unprepared for online learning (Ahmed, 2023). Still, there are promising signs: some village-based programs

that involve parents have helped children develop better social and emotional skills (Raza & Iqbal, 2021).

Globally, early childhood education varies by country and culture. Alexander (2001) found that curriculum, teaching methods, and power structures all shape how children learn in countries like England, France, India, and the USA. Similarly, the NICHD study showed that high quality daycare improves thinking and language skills by age four, though excessive time in care can lead to behavior problems highlighting the need for balance (AERA, 2022).

Literature Review

Physical activity is also crucial for young children's development. Experts recommend at least three hours of movement daily, with one hour of active play. However, many children especially in urban settings do not meet this standard (Tucker, 2008). In Islamabad's rural preschools, a study found that parents with limited education and income were less involved in their children's learning, often unaware of preschool's importance. This led to weaker social and cognitive development (Khan, 2023). Another study highlighted a lack of learning materials, outdated teaching styles, and limited play resources, calling for more engaging methods like games and cultural activities (Ahmed, 2022). Parental complaints about unresponsive teachers and poor play facilities also emphasized the need for better teacher training and parental awareness (Malik et al., n.d.).

Nutrition and health also play a key role. Malnutrition remains widespread in Pakistan due to poverty, unhealthy diets, health issues, and social factors like early marriage. The country has made very slow progress in reducing stunting, improving by just 0.5%. Experts stress the importance of supporting mothers before and during pregnancy and improving early nutrition, clean water access, and health care (Ali, 2020; Bhutta, 2020).

Worldwide, the early years (birth to age 5–8) are seen as critical for lifelong learning. Different terms like ECCE, ECD, and ECE all focus on helping children grow in safe and supportive environments (Essa, 2005; Syeda, 2016). In Pakistan, ECE usually refers to education for children aged 3–5 with trained teachers in formal settings (MoE, 2009, 2017). Religion also has a strong influence, with about 80% of children receiving some form of Islamic education from age three (Ahmed, 2011; UNESCO, 2015).

Pakistan began prioritizing early education only in the 1990s, mainly for wealthy children in private schools. After joining global movements like Education for All, the government started focusing more on early childhood programs. However, access and quality remain uneven, especially in rural areas, where many children still lack basic educational opportunities (Ahmed, 2011; Khan, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two main ideas that help explain how young children grow and learn. The first is Epstein's Model of Parental Involvement, which says that children do better when their parents take an active role in their education. This can include things like helping them at home, talking with teachers, volunteering at school, being part of school decisions, and connecting with the community. In rural parts of Pakistan, where families have different

customs and lifestyles, this model helps us understand how parent involvement can shape a child's development.

The second idea comes from the UNESCO ECCE Framework, which explains that a child's growth depends on more than just school. Children also need good health, enough nutrition, a safe environment, and chances to learn through play and everyday life. This framework is especially useful in rural areas like those near Islamabad, because it encourages education programs that respect local culture and real-life needs.

Together, these two ideas show that children grow best when schools, families, and communities all work together—supporting not just education, but also the child's health, emotions, and social skills.

Analysis and Discussion

This study used two types of data: numbers from surveys and stories from interviews and classroom observations. The aim was to find out what helps or hinders young children's overall development in rural Islamabad. The surveys showed that most parents and teachers agree early education is important. Children whose parents helped with reading at home performed better in school. However, many parents said they don't get regular updates from teachers about their child's progress. Also, most schools lack enough toys, books, and play space for proper learning.

From interviews and classroom visits, teachers said they don't receive enough training or resources to teach in creative and fun ways. Although the government promotes play-based learning, schools often don't have what they need to make this possible. Parents also want better communication and more learning materials. Cultural habits influence how parents and teachers view children's learning and freedom. For example, some families discourage kids from asking questions or playing freely, which can limit their development. Awareness programs in communities could help change these habits and improve learning.

The survey data showed that when parents are more involved—especially in reading—children do better and feel more confident. However, political knowledge or education laws were not a big concern for parents, who focus more on daily family and school life. A key problem was poor communication between teachers and parents. Many parents reported they rarely hear from teachers about their child's progress. Schools also lacked toys and learning tools, making learning less enjoyable for children. Observations and interviews revealed that many teachers were not well trained in play-based teaching, and classrooms had few engaging activities. Traditional beliefs at home also sometimes restrict children's freedom to learn and express themselves. These issues highlight the need for better teacher training and programs that help families support early learning.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was done in a small area only in rural Islamabad and with a limited number of people.. Also, most of the information came from what parents and teachers said about themselves, which might not be 100% accurate. Future research should include more areas both cities and villages and more families. It would also help to follow children over a longer time to see how they grow. The government should spend more money on training teachers,

building better classrooms, and creating programs to get parents involved in learning. Schools should also include health and nutrition support, especially because problems like malnutrition can stop children from growing well. All of this should be done in a way that fits local culture and helps poorer families too.

Conclusion

This study looked at what affects the complete (holistic) development of preschool children in rural Islamabad. It found that when parents help their children at home especially with reading it really helps kids do better in school and grow emotionally and mentally. On the other hand, things like political awareness didn't make a big difference. The study showed that many schools don't have enough learning tools, and communication between teachers and parents is often weak. Teachers also said they need better training and support. Health and food problems, like malnutrition, were also a big issue. Based on the two main theories used Epstein's and UNESCO's frameworks the study recommends better cooperation between parents and schools, more teacher training, improved classrooms, and health support programs in preschools. If these changes are made, children in Pakistan can have a better start in life. Policies must also respect local traditions and make sure children in poorer areas are not left behind. More research is needed in other parts of the country to make better decisions for the future of early childhood education.

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