

**PROMOTING HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT
AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN
PAKISTAN**

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ASIA e UNIVERSITY

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PROMOTING HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT AMONG PRESCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the multifaceted aspects of holistic development in early childhood education (ECE) within a rural setting of Islamabad, Pakistan, focusing on how cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and linguistic domains evolve in the early years. Despite policy-level efforts—such as establishing preschool classrooms—numerous challenges continue to obstruct effective implementation. These include inadequate infrastructure, poorly trained teachers, and a curriculum that lacks depth and coherence. The study frames its analysis using Epstein’s family-school-community partnership theory and UNESCO’s early education framework, both of which emphasize the interconnected roles of families, schools, and communities in shaping young children’s growth. Employing a deductive mixed-methods approach, the research collects data through a variety of sources, questionnaires, interviews, observations, and focus groups—at the Islamabad Model School for Girls. These methods enable a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators. Key findings reveal that children’s pre-learning experiences, parental awareness of available services, and the broader socio-political environment are significant influencers of holistic development. However, these areas are often overlooked in the rural context, resulting in a lack of preparedness among both children and educators. The study particularly highlights how minimal parental engagement and fragmented curriculum delivery restrict children’s ability to thrive across developmental domains. Based on its findings, the study makes strategic recommendations aimed at strengthening rural ECE. It calls for more robust teacher training programs to ensure educators are equipped to support all aspects of child development. Equally important is enhancing parental involvement through community outreach and awareness initiatives, aligning with Epstein’s theory that family-school collaboration is essential to student success. Furthermore, the study urges the adoption of an integrated curriculum that promotes balanced growth across all developmental areas rather than isolating them. These reforms, if implemented, could greatly improve educational equity and outcomes for children in underserved rural communities.

Keywords: Early childhood education, early childhood development, early childhood education and development, EFA (Education for All), NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Educational Fund), embedded control developers

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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(25 June 2025)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Saima Yunus', with a large circular flourish on the left and a horizontal line at the bottom.

Signature of Student:

Date: 25 June 2025

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARNEC	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood
CPD	Continuous Professional Development / Continuing Professional Development.
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education.
IECD	Integrated Early Childhood Development
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NEF	The National Education Foundation
OCED	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
QUED	Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development Punjab
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a branch of educational theory focusing on teaching and development of children from birth to around age eight (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], July 17, 2025). The field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) began to emerge during the Enlightenment, particularly in European countries with high literacy rates, and gained momentum in the nineteenth century with movements such as the kindergarten, founded by Friedrich Fröbel (Fröbel, 1887). As such, this chapter will present the background of the study, its statement of problem, objectives, conceptual framework, limitations and significance of the study.

1.0 Background of the Studies

Early childhood education, 2025. ECE takes a holistic approach, addressing children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic needs to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (SpringerLink, 2020). Early childhood is a critical period: by age five, around 85– 90% of brain development has occurred, and early experiences heavily influence future cognitive abilities and social competence. (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Early childhood is a pivotal phase in human development, with experience-based interventions showing profound, long-lasting benefits across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains (Frontiers in Nutrition, 2023; Tahira et al., 2023). Holistic development—fostering all aspects of a child's growth—has become a global priority and is increasingly emphasized in quality ECE frameworks (Frontiers in Nutrition, 2023). In Pakistan, however, the implementation of such holistic approaches remains uneven and under- resourced. Research indicates that both public and private sectors struggle with inconsistent quality standards, inadequate teacher

training, and insufficient monitoring or evaluation systems (Tahira et al., 2023). The Punjab government's ECE initiatives, including dedicated preschool classrooms, did yield cognitive benefits among children but serious gaps persisted in educator preparation and infrastructure (Yasrab and Shah, 2022). Moreover, studies highlight the importance of nurturing play-based learning to support children's imagination, exploration, and social abilities (Sohail and Aziz, 2024). Despite teachers valuing ECE's benefits, challenges with resource distribution, curriculum consistency, and institutional support remain common (Iqbal and Bilal, 2023). These issues are compounded by limited parental awareness, underfunded public sector schools, and a general de-emphasis of non-academic dimensions of development (Qayyum et al., 2024).

Although NGO and government led models (such as the "Roshan Kal" caregiver intervention) integrate health, nutrition, and developmental support aligned with global nurturing care standards scale up remains limited and effectiveness is varied at wider rollout levels (Frontiers in Nutrition, 2023; AKU-HDP, 2021–2022). Given these conditions, the present study seeks to explore and identify sustainable, culturally responsive strategies to promote holistic development among preschoolers in Pakistan. By assessing current ECE practices, pinpointing barriers to comprehensive growth, and proposing context-appropriate solutions, this research aims to contribute to the enhancement of early education quality and equity, laying foundations for improved lifelong outcomes.

Promoting holistic development in Pakistan's ECCE curriculum involves integrating physical, cognitive, emotional, social/moral, health and environmental learning, understood as interconnected rather than sequential domains. The pedagogy emphasizes active, experiential learning, intrinsic motivation, dignity, and child-led

experiences (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training) The 2024 Sindh policy defines holistic development as fostering academic knowledge together with socio emotional skills, cognitive readiness, and inclusive practices, ensuring children receive well-rounded growth in ECE through integrated care and learning interventions (Ali, 2024). UNICEF Pakistan describes holistic development as a multi-sectoral, integrated approach combining health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early stimulation and early learning to develop children’s physical/motor, cognitive, emotional and social skills (UNICEF Pakistan.)

Holistic development is defined to encompass emotional, physical, mental, and moral growth through education, particularly during the first 1,000 days, emphasizing that ECCE activities should target multiple domains together (Curriculum for ECCE, 2017). AKES defines holistic development through its HighScope-inspired ECCE program, which support children across five domains—learning approaches, language and communication, social-emotional, physical-health, and early science/math/arts—all promoted in culturally responsive and child-centered environments (Aga Khan Education Service.) The UNICEF “Holistic Early Child Development Toolkit” defines holistic ECD as the integrated delivery of health, nutrition, WASH, child protection, early learning, and responsive parenting services, emphasizing synergy across domains to support social, cognitive, intellectual, and physical development (UNICEF EAP.)

Holistic development is presented as inclusive, rights-based ECE that ensures equitable access, quality infrastructure, diverse modalities, and interactive experiences for gestation to age 5, promoting children’s physical, cognitive, emotional and social well-being (UNESCO). This model highlights “whole child development,” where responsive caregiving, early learning, health, nutrition, security and safety jointly contribute to holistic development—urging cross-sector collaboration to meet all

child needs for full thriving (InterAction, 2024) DAP defines holistic growth as nurturing children’s social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development by tailoring instruction to developmental research, individual differences, and cultural contexts (Bredekamp, 1997 as de- scribed in Gestwicki, 2010).

A holistic development approach is described as a method that recognizes the interconnectedness of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, asserting that children learn most effectively when multiple domains are nurtured simultaneously (Fiveable glossary.)

1.1 UNESCO Definition of ECE

UNESCO (2025) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) encompasses “a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during the early years of life; it includes education, physical, social, and emotional care, as well as intellectual stimulation, health care, and nutrition.” The World Conference on Education for All (1990) also emphasized that learning be- gins at birth. The period from birth to age eight is characterized by rapid brain development and represents a critical window of opportunity for effective education. In UNESCO’s view, inclusive ECCE goes far beyond merely preparing children for primary school. It supports holistic child development—fostering physical health, emotional well-being, cognitive growth, and social integration. UNESCO. (n.d.) Early childhood care and education. UNESCO,, 2025).

UNESCO. (2018, April 20) further asserts that ECCE contributes to long-term benefits such as gender equality and social cohesion. As such, high-quality early childhood programs are not only essential for individual development but also represent one of the most impactful investments a nation can make for its social and economic future. UNESCO strongly promotes a holistic approach to Early Childhood